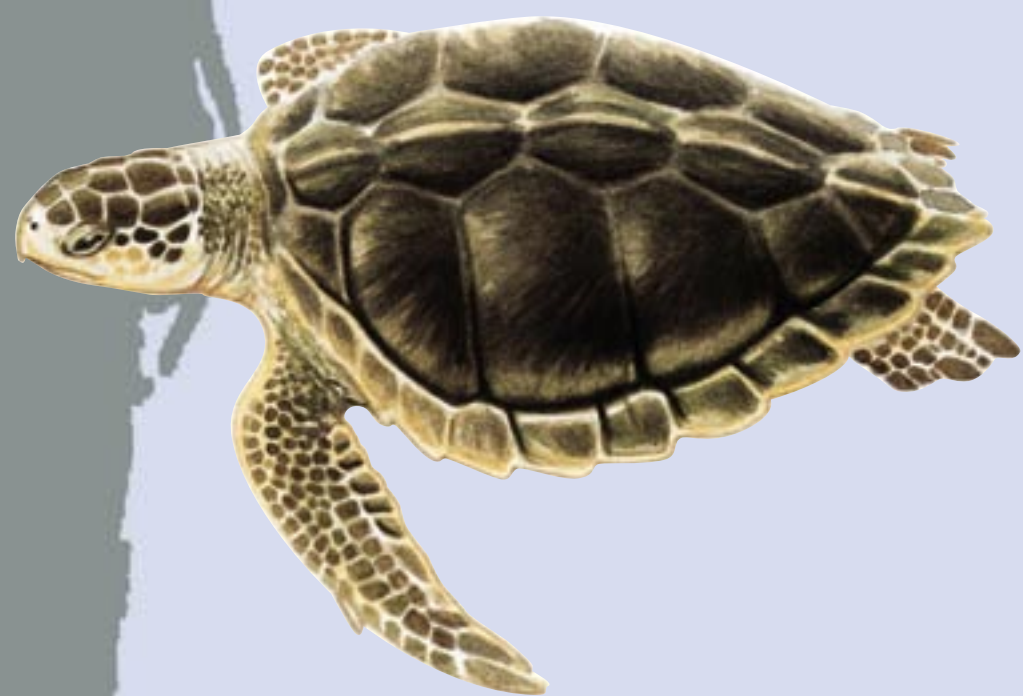


Sea Turtles of the Gulf of Mexico



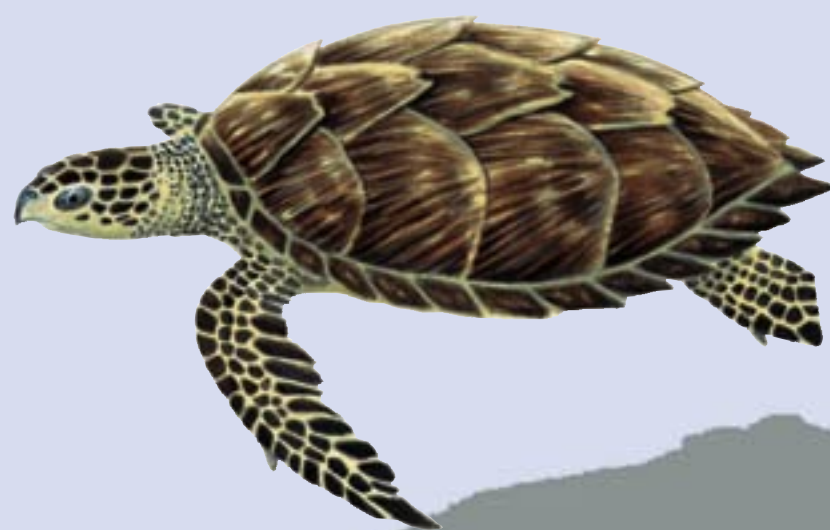
Kemp's Ridley (*Lepidochelys kempii*)

The smallest (80-100 lb.) and most endangered of all the sea turtles nests only along the shores of the Gulf of Mexico. Just 30 years ago, the Kemp's Ridley, known as the "heartbreak turtle," was sliding toward extinction with their eggs being eaten in Mexico and the U.S. and Mexican shrimp fleets drowning them in the Gulf. The species was saved by remarkable teamwork of Mexican and U.S. biologists, government agencies and citizens. Thanks to the federal "Head Starting" experiment at Galveston, Texas, and the educational features it offered, the public was made aware of the drowning of thousands of sea turtles in shrimp trawls. Some of these "Head Started" ridleys are now nesting in both Texas and Mexico. The Kemp's ridley prefers blue crabs and clams to eat. Kemp's ridley females nest in the daytime on windy days with large numbers arriving onto the nesting beach simultaneously in an event called an arribada.



Loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*)

Named for its large head, the loggerhead can weigh 400 pounds and is reddish-brown in color. It eats crabs and large shellfish with its strong crushing jaws. There are nesting populations in the Eastern Gulf of Mexico, Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans and the Mediterranean Sea but many are in decline because of long line, shrimp trawl and gill net fisheries. More than 100 species of plants and animals attach to the shells of loggerheads that carry them along. Its largest population is in south Florida where many organizations are working to protect them.



Hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*)

The hawksbill sea turtles have been killed for centuries for their beautiful shells which are made into jewelry. They can grow to 200 pounds and be three feet long. Trade in tortoise shell is now banned internationally but the populations remain small and endangered. Over 95 percent of their diet are the sponges they love to tear apart with their hawk-like beak. Hawksbills live in the waters of over 80 nations with the largest populations in the Caribbean Sea, the Seychelles, Indonesia and Australia. They live on reefs and migrate thousands of miles to the beaches where they were hatched. The hawksbill needs protection on all nesting beaches worldwide if it is to survive.



Green (*Chelonia mydas*)

The green turtle is an international animal visiting the coastal waters of about 140 countries. It has been hunted as a source of meat and is best known as the ingredient of turtle soup. Feeding on sea grasses and algae, their fat and muscles are green. Growing to over 400 pounds and four feet long, green sea turtles do not mature for 30 to 40 years, the longest time required by any turtle. Friendly to scuba divers, greens can often be photographed up close. They seem particularly vulnerable to the Fibropapilloma tumor for which there is no cure. Research continues to find the cause and cure for the tumors which can occur both on the skin and internal organs of Greens, Hawksbills, Loggerheads, Leatherbacks, Flatbacks and Olive Ridleys.

Major threats to all sea turtles are shrimp trawls, long lines, gill nets, oil spills, propellor strikes, marine debris, egg poaching, habitat loss, sea walls, beach nourishment and artificial lighting.



Leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*)

Known as the largest turtle in the world, the Leatherback can dive as deep as a whale - 4,000 feet. Sometimes thought to be a sea serpent, their shell is leatherlike and oil saturated with seven long ridges. They are found around the world as far north as Newfoundland. Leatherbacks eat jellyfish and swim faster than any other reptile due to the shape of their shell. Although rare in the Gulf of Mexico, the leatherback can grow to over six feet long weighing 2,000 pounds. Leatherbacks are critically endangered internationally and populations are falling due to longline and gill net fisheries.

"Extinction is not inevitable. Don't stand by while the last of these beautiful creatures disappears. Extinction is inevitable only if we sit back and watch it happen on the evening news."

James R. Spotila, Ph.D., Drexel University

CALL 1-866-TURTLE-5!

This toll-free number is provided by the Sea Turtle Restoration Project for public use to report information about sea turtles on the Texas coast.

If a live or dead sea turtle or tracks are seen on any Texas beach, **1-866-TURTLE-5** should be called immediately. Sea turtle experts from the National Park Service, Texas Parks and Wildlife, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Marine Fisheries Service, Texas A&M University, the University of Texas system and Sea Turtle, Inc. are available to provide information or go to the site. Anyone taking or having a threatened or endangered sea turtle in their possession can be charged with a felony and fines ranging up to \$20,000 under federal law.

Sea Turtle Restoration Project websites: www.seaturtles.org and www.ridleyturtles.org