



Loggerhead Turtle

Caretta caretta

About the Species

Loggerheads were named for their relatively large heads, which support powerful jaws and enable them to feed on hard-shelled prey, such as whelks and conch. They are circumglobal, occurring throughout the temperate and tropical regions of the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans. Loggerheads are the most abundant species of sea turtle found in U.S. coastal waters.

Five distinct population segments (DPS) of loggerheads are listed as endangered and 4 DPS are listed as threatened under the [Endangered Species Act](#).

NOAA Fisheries is committed to conserving and protecting loggerhead sea turtles. Our scientists and partners use a variety of innovative techniques to study and protect this species.

Species Description

Weight: Adult: 250 pounds (113 kg)
Hatchling: 0.05 pounds (20 g)

Length: Adult: 3 feet (~1 m)
Hatchling: 2 inches (4 cm)

Appearance: reddish-brown, slightly heart-shaped top shell ("carapace") with pale yellowish bottom shell ("plastron"); hatchlings are brown to dark gray

Lifespan: unknown, but they reach sexual maturity at around 35 years old

Diet: whelks and conch

Behavior: females nest from April-September and generally lay 3-5 nests per season

Loggerheads were named for their relatively large heads, which support powerful jaws and enable them to feed on hard-shelled prey, such as whelks and conch. The top shell (carapace) is slightly heart-shaped and reddish-brown in adults and sub-adults, while the bottom shell (plastron) is generally a pale yellowish color. The neck and flippers are usually dull brown to reddish brown on top and medium to pale yellow on the sides and bottom.

In the southeastern U.S., mating occurs in late March to early June and females lay eggs between late April and early September. Females lay three to five nests, and sometimes more, during a single nesting season. The eggs incubate approximately two months before hatching sometime between late June and mid-November.

Hatchlings lack the reddish-brown coloration of adults and juveniles. Their flippers are dark gray to brown above with white to white-gray margins. The coloration of the plastron is generally yellowish to tan.

Habitat

Loggerheads occupy three different ecosystems during their lives:
beaches (terrestrial zone)

Information from: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/species/turtles/loggerhead.html>

water (oceanic zone)
nearshore coastal areas ("neritic" zone)

Loggerheads nest on ocean beaches, generally preferring high energy, relatively narrow, steeply sloped, coarse-grained beaches.

Immediately after hatchlings emerge from the nest, they begin a period of frenzied activity. During this active period, hatchlings move from their nest to the surf, swim, and are swept through the surf zone, and continue swimming away from land for up to several days.

After this swim frenzy period, post-hatchling loggerheads take up residence in areas where surface waters converge to form local downwellings. These areas are often characterized by accumulations of floating material, such as seaweed (for example, Sargassum), and, in the southeast U.S., are common between the Gulf Stream and the southeast U.S. coast, and between the Loop Current and the Gulf Coast of Florida. Post-hatchlings within this habitat are observed to be low-energy float-and-wait foragers that feed on a wide variety of floating items (Witherington 2002). As post-hatchlings, loggerheads may linger for months in waters just off the nesting beach or become transported by ocean currents within the Gulf of Mexico and North Atlantic. Work by Lohmann and Lohmann (1994b, 1996) and Lohmann et al. (1999) suggests that loggerheads may continue some oriented swimming in order to keep from being swept into cold North Atlantic currents. Scientists are also remotely tracking neonate loggerhead sea turtles using small, solar-powered satellite tags.

Once individuals get transported by ocean currents farther offshore, they've entered the oceanic zone. Within the North Atlantic, juvenile loggerheads have been primarily studied in the waters around the Azores and Madeira (Bolten 2003). Other populations exist (for example, in the region of the Grand Banks off Newfoundland), but data on these populations are limited. The juvenile turtles around the Azores and Madeira spend the majority of their time in the top 15 feet (5 m) of the water column.

Somewhere between 7-12 years old, oceanic juveniles migrate to nearshore coastal areas (neritic zone) and continue maturing until adulthood. In addition to providing critically important habitat for juveniles, the neritic zone also provides crucial foraging habitat, inter-nesting habitat, and migratory habitat for adult loggerheads in the western North Atlantic. To a large extent, these habitats overlap with the juvenile stage, the exception being most of the bays, sounds, and estuaries along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts of the U.S. from Massachusetts to Texas, which are infrequently used by adults. However, adult loggerheads are present year-round in Florida Bay, an important feeding area, probably because of relatively easy access to open ocean and migratory routes.

The predominate foraging areas for western North Atlantic adult loggerheads are found throughout the relatively shallow continental shelf waters of the U.S., Bahamas, Cuba, and the Yucatán Peninsula, Mexico. Migration routes from foraging habitats to nesting beaches (and vice versa) for a portion of the population are restricted to the continental shelf, while other routes involve crossing oceanic waters to and from the Bahamas, Cuba, and the Yucatán Peninsula. Seasonal migrations of adult loggerheads along the mid- and southeast U.S. coasts have also been documented.