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## The Season for Sea Turtles

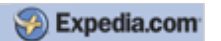


National Park Service

Turtle hatchlings are released at Padre Island National Seashore.

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By KEITH MULVIHILL  
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**BARELY** an hour into a beach excursion one May morning last year, Lisa Ellington had, as she describes it, the experience of a lifetime. A longtime lover of marine life, Ms. Ellington, who lives in [San Antonio](#), had dreamed of seeing a sea turtle emerge from the surf to lay its eggs on the beach. Despite knowing that her chances were slim, she drove two hours to Padre Island National Seashore on the [Texas](#) coast, where rare Kemp’s ridley sea turtles were known to nest.

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National Park Service

A baby heads to the sea.

Shortly after she arrived, Ms. Ellington and a nature guide she had hired came upon a couple of park rangers crouched low in the sand. “They were with a Kemp’s ridley that was on its way back to the ocean after laying its eggs,” Ms. Ellington said. To her amazement, the rangers enlisted her to help steady the creature while they weighed and measured it for research purposes. “It was the most incredible thing,” she said.

As she held the turtle, she marveled at its strength and exotic features. “They look so prehistoric, and their skin is really thick, like armor.” When the group finished, the turtle made a break for the surf. “They move a lot faster on land than you’d expect,” she said. “It was just amazing to watch it swim away.”

For marine life enthusiasts, a chance to see a wild sea turtle ranks high on wish lists. And on Southeastern and Gulf Coast [beaches](#), summer brings opportunities. Five species of sea turtles, all protected under the Endangered Species Act, visit American beaches annually: loggerhead, green, leatherback, hawksbill and Kemp’s ridley, the most endangered of the group.

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Ms. Ellington saw a second Kemp's ridley later that day, but Donna Shaver, chief of the national seashore's Division of Sea Turtle Science and Recovery, said visitors can't assume they will be so lucky.

After 30 years, a project to re-establish a nesting population on the island is just starting to bear fruit: a record 102 Kemp's ridley nests were documented along the Texas coast in 2006, compared with just 6 nests a decade earlier. Sixty-four of the nests were found at Padre Island National Seashore (not to be confused with South Padre Island, the famous spring break hot spot farther down the coast).

If adult Kemp's ridleys prove elusive, visitors can attend one of the hatchling release events run by Ms. Shaver. Eggs are collected on the beach, to keep them safe from predators, and incubated in a nearby laboratory. The babies are freed on the beach with the hope that they will return to the same spot when they are old enough to lay eggs of their own. Last year, Ms. Shaver's team released 8,000 baby turtles into the Gulf of Mexico.

Releases this year are expected to begin between June 10 and June 15 and continue until mid-August. Ms. Shaver said potential visitors should check a Web site ([www.nps.gov/pais/naturescience/current-season.htm](http://www.nps.gov/pais/naturescience/current-season.htm)) for daily updates. Out-of-towners are encouraged to plan a trip during a period when several clutches of eggs are due to hatch.

On the southeastern Atlantic coast, nesting sea turtles are more prevalent. Last year in Florida, 8,000 people participated in 222 turtle walks organized with permits from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Meghan Koperski, an environmental specialist with the agency, said 300 walks were expected this summer. (A list is posted under "public turtle watches" at <http://myfwc.com/seaturtle>.)

Turtle walks are also conducted in the Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge in Melbourne Beach, Fla., prime turtle territory where on a 20-mile stretch of beach 10,830 loggerhead nests were documented last year. David Godfrey, executive director of the nonprofit [Caribbean](#) Conservation Corporation, which conducts some of the walks, said a typical one starts around sundown and can last two hours or more. While participants listen to an educational talk, scouts patrol the beach for turtles that have dug egg chambers and are in position to start laying their eggs. Then the turtle watchers walk to a nest, form a semicircle around the back of the turtle and watch it lay up to 100 ping-pong-ball-sized eggs. Often there is enough ambient light; otherwise the group leader may use a red-filtered light.

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Ms. Koperski, who has attended many turtle walks, said the reaction of the crowd was always the same: “No matter how loud the group, once they’re out there behind the turtle and the egg laying has begun, everyone becomes quiet, speaking only in whispers.”

## **Details**

### **TEXAS**

#### **Padre Island National Seashore.**

*What:* Hatchling releases; 361-949-7163; [www.nps.gov/pais](http://www.nps.gov/pais).

*When:* Mid-June through mid-August.

### **FLORIDA**

#### **Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge, near Melbourne Beach.**

*What:* Turtle walks, 352-373-6441; [www.cccturtle.org](http://www.cccturtle.org)

*When:* June and July.

#### **Sebastian Inlet State Park, near Melbourne Beach.**

*What:* Turtle walks, 321-984-4852; [www.floridastateparks.org/sebastianinlet](http://www.floridastateparks.org/sebastianinlet).

*When:* June and July.

#### **Gumbo Limbo Environmental Complex, [Boca Raton](http://www.gumbolimbo.org).**

*What:* Turtle walks, hatchling releases; 561-338-1473; [www.gumbolimbo.org](http://www.gumbolimbo.org).

*When:* Turtle walks now through July 5; hatchling releases starting July 23.

#### **Loggerhead Marinelifelife Center of Juno Beach.**

**What:** Turtle walks (561-627-8280; [www.marinelife.org](http://www.marinelife.org)).

**When:** June and July.

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