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Sea Turtle Nesting Season Begins on the Texas Coast

Look out for Kemp's ridley sea turtles on the Texas coast this spring and summer, and help protect the most critically endangered sea turtle in the world. Sea turtle nesting season begins on April 1, 2009. Throughout nesting season, employees and volunteers representing several federal, state and county agencies, and volunteer organizations will be patrolling Texas Gulf beaches daily from April through July. They will be working to find and protect nesting sea turtles and their eggs to ensure their survival and promote continued population growth. Patrols will be held during the day since these two-foot-long turtles come ashore for nesting mostly during daylight hours. The public is encouraged to report sea turtle observations by calling 1-866-TURTLE 5.

In 1947, an estimated 40,000 Kemp's ridley turtles nested on one stretch of beach near Rancho Nuevo, Mexico. However, the species suffered a devastating decline over the next four decades and the nesting population produced a low of 702 nests in 1985, making it the most endangered sea turtle species. In response, the Service and its partner agencies launched a cooperative international project aimed at nest protection efforts in the U.S. and Mexico, implementing regulations requiring the use of turtle excluder devices on commercial fishing trawls, and establishing a second nesting colony of Kemp's ridley sea turtles at Padre Island National Seashore. Now their efforts are paying off.

In 2008, while the majority of Kemp's ridley sea turtle nests were found along the gulf coast of Mexico, 195 nests were also found along Texas beaches, the highest number on record for Texas since recovery efforts began. In fact, for the last five years, the number of Kemp's ridley nests found along Texas beaches has increased each year. Although nearly 60% of the nests in Texas are found on North Padre Island, including Padre Island National Seashore, nesting is now state-wide.

Beach goers also play an important role in the detection of Kemp's ridley sea turtle nests, with up to half of the nests being found and reported in some areas of the state by the public. Visitors to Texas beaches between April through August are urged to watch for nesting and emerging hatchlings and report them immediately. If a nesting mother is seen, the Service advises visitors to keep their distance until she has begun laying her eggs, or returns to the ocean.

While laying their eggs, Kemp's ridley sea turtles enter a trance-like state and will not move from their nest. When laying turtles are in this trance state, members of the public are encouraged to look at the front flippers for a metal tag, record the number without removing the tag, and report the tag number to 1-866-TURTLE 5. Nesting sites should be marked carefully, making sure not to pierce the sand, which can damage the eggs. After the turtle is done laying her eggs, those in the vicinity are asked to allow her to enter the surf and, if possible, remain at the site until a biologist arrives.

In order to further help protect the species, the public is asked to drive slowly and carefully during the nesting and hatching seasons so that vehicles do not inadvertently collide with nesting turtles or hatchlings. Those visiting the area should be prepared for travel delays on the beach due to efforts to ensure that nesting turtles and hatchlings to remain safe and undisturbed. Taking, intentionally harming, or having in your possession any part of these threatened or endangered turtles is a felony with fines ranging up to \$20,000.

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