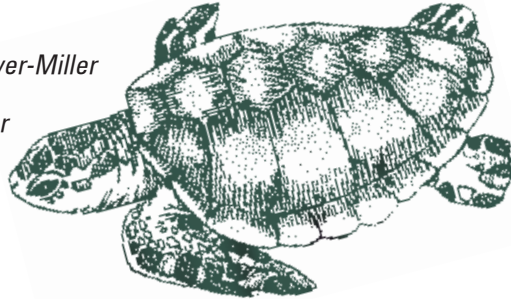


Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtles ...An Imperiled Species

USGS Principle Investigator: Donna Shaver-Miller
Sea Turtle Ecologist
Columbia Environmental Research Center
Padre Island Field Research Station
Padre Island, TX
361-949-8173 x226
Donna_Shaver@usgs.gov



Following the Kemp's ridley on their perilous trek from Padre Island National Seashore, TX, where they are establishing a secondary nesting colony, to the Gulf of Mexico, is tricky business. Satellite transmitters are attached to a select number of females returning to the sea after laying eggs, their movements tracked by receivers picking up the signals emitted from their backpacks. This signal tells the scientists where the adults are feeding and resting before making their journey back to the island. The transmitters can last up to 18 months on their backs before failing or falling off. Recent information from the transmitter/receiver data shows that many of the females are hugging the south Texas shoreline, staying in warmer, more shallow waters. In addition, autopsies of Kemp's ridleys washed onshore verify that these adults are primarily feeding on crabs. Just knowing what areas of this Gulf coast that might need special protection is valuable information for wildlife authorities.

The scarcity of Kemp's ridleys about 20 years ago prompted efforts to establish a protected nesting colony in the United States. From 1978-1989, an international project began with the intent to increase the number of Kemp's ridley nesting on Padre Island National Seashore. This ambitious program had one grand goal - the conservation and recovery of this ancient sea species. Eggs were airlifted from Rancho Nuevo, Mexico to south Texas, hatched in controlled conditions, and released along the south Texas shore of the Gulf of Mexico. Scientists hoped that turtles would eventually return to nest and establish a colony at Padre Island National Seashore where protection and care are available.

Now, 10 to 15 year old mature Kemp's ridley females are returning to the south Texas coast to nest. Many are found nesting on Padre Island National Seashore, identified by their coded markings from the hatching program established 20 years ago. The first known female to return and nest was in 1996, hatched at Padre Island National Seashore in 1983. Since 1996, nine marked females nested on North Padre Island and nearby Mustang Island.



Stretches of beach along the Gulf of Mexico near Rancho Nuevo, Mexico are the primary nesting sites for Kemp's ridleys. Rancho Nuevo is located in the southern State of Tamaulipas. Prior to establishing the secondary nesting colony at Padre Island National Seashore, Texas, a few nested sporadically to the north and south of Rancho Nuevo, on Padre Island, and in the States of Veracruz and Tabasco (Mexico). Known feeding grounds for adult Kemp's ridley are in the Gulf of Mexico, including the crab-rich shallow waters off Texas, Louisiana, around the Mississippi Delta, and Tabasco-Campeche, Mexico.



Protecting Kemp's ridleys is a cooperative venture of the U.S. Geological Survey, National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Marine Fisheries Service, National Park Foundation, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Shell, Canon U.S.A., Mexico's Instituto Nacional de la Pesca, and many other organizations.