

# Outer Banks beaches saw a busy sea turtle nesting season

November 6 2023, by Corinne Saunders, The Virginian-Pilot

---



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

On the Outer Banks, 2023 nesting numbers indicate that sea turtles had a solid year.

The three groups working in sea turtle conservation from Ocracoke Island to the Virginia state line all reported busy seasons, with a total of 459 nests.

This year tied with 2022 as the second-busiest nesting season on record at Cape Hatteras National Seashore, which covers over 70 miles and stretches from Ocracoke Island to Nags Head.

Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge, which covers about 13 miles on the north end of Hatteras Island, reported its third-busiest nesting season since 2009.

The all-volunteer nonprofit N.E.S.T. (Network for Endangered Sea Turtles), which covers the about 50 miles from Nags Head to the Virginia line, reported its third-busiest season since 2015.

Six [sea turtle species](#) are native to United States waters, all of which are listed as endangered and are protected under the Endangered Species Act.

Four of those species are known to [nest](#) on the Outer Banks, although two rarely do.

As usual, the loggerhead was by far the species that most frequently nested on all local beaches in 2023. Green turtles also nested on the Outer Banks.

Only Cape Hatteras National Seashore reported Kemp's ridley and leatherback nests.

Cape Hatteras National Seashore recorded 379 nests, with the first found on May 12 and the most recent found on Oct. 29, according to Mike Barber, National Park Service spokesperson. By species, the nests

comprised 324 loggerheads, 51 [green turtles](#), three Kemp's ridleys and one leatherback.

Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge saw 43 [sea turtle nests](#) in 2023. Of those, 37 were loggerhead nests and six were green turtle nests, according to its data submitted to the statewide Sea Turtle Nest Monitoring System website.

N.E.S.T. logged 37 nests in 2023. Thirty of those were loggerhead nests and seven were green turtle nests, according to Vice President Susan Silbernagel.

In each of the three jurisdictions, people monitor beaches for nests and try to help protect them.

Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge staff members have been monitoring and protecting sea turtle nests in the refuge since 1980, according to [seaturtle.org](#).

Refuge data since 2009 shows an average of about 30 nests a year. In the last 15 years, only the 53 nests in 2022 and the 47 in 2021 topped this year's 43 nests.

N.E.S.T., meanwhile, has documented an annual average of 33 nests since 2015, according to Silbernagel. Last year's 47 nests and the 51 nests in 2016 were the only two recent years to top this year's 37 nests.

Early each morning from May 1 to Sept. 1, a team of N.E.S.T. volunteers on ATVs patrols the 50 miles of northern Outer Banks beach in search of turtle crawls and nests, according to [www.nestonline.org](#).

At Cape Hatteras National Seashore, biological science technicians monitor the beaches daily from May 1 through two weeks after the last

nest is laid—typically around the end of October, according to Michelle Tongue. She is deputy chief of resource management and science for the Outer Banks Group, which comprises Cape Hatteras National Seashore, Fort Raleigh National Historic Site and the Wright Brothers National Memorial.

Staff members establish a buffer around sea turtle nests for protection, sometimes also installing a predator guard over the top. The guard still allows hatchlings to emerge and follow the moonlight to the ocean, she explained in an email.

Regular sea turtle monitoring at the seashore began in 1997, when the resource management division was formed. Since then, the program has generally expanded both its staffing and the time spent monitoring as the numbers of nests have increased, according to Tongue.

"We could not manage and monitor sea turtle nesting without the help of over 50 dedicated volunteers that assist with monitoring of our nests and reporting and responding to sea turtle strandings," Tongue added.

Seashore data over the last 15 years shows an annual average of 312 nests.

Only the 473 nests recorded in 2019 topped the 379 nests recorded last year and this year, according to Barber.

This year, 260 [nests](#) were located on Hatteras Island, 112 were on Ocracoke Island and seven were on Bodie Island, according to National Park Service information.

More than 25,000 sea turtle hatchlings began their journeys to the ocean from Cape Hatteras National Seashore in 2023, according to the 2023 "Sea Turtle Scoop" Outer Banks Forever news release on Oct. 27.

Outer Banks Forever is the official nonprofit partner of the three local national parks. Its Adopt A Sea Turtle Nest program helped raise nearly \$29,000 this year "to protect and enhance the Seashore and the vital sea turtle habitat it preserves," the release said.

Sea turtles are endangered because of human activities.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, or NOAA, lists sea turtles' biggest threats as becoming bycatch in fishing gear, nesting habitat loss and degradation, vessel strikes, ocean pollution and marine debris, climate change and people's direct harvest of sea turtles and eggs.

Historically, people killed green turtles "in extraordinarily high numbers for their fat, meat and eggs," according to the NOAA website; and other species also suffered this.

Green turtles are the only species that are herbivores, eating mostly seagrasses and algae. Their diet gives their fat its greenish color, and this gave them their name, according to [www.fisheries.noaa.gov](http://www.fisheries.noaa.gov).

The loggerheads are named for their large heads that support powerful jaw muscles, which they use to eat hard-shelled prey, such as crabs, horseshoe crabs, whelks, conch and other mollusks, according to the NOAA website.

Kemp's ridley sea turtles are the smallest species and once were abundant in the Gulf of Mexico.

"The population crashed in the mid-20th century to a low of only several hundred females nesting in the 1980s," the NOAA website said.

"Intensive conservation actions were implemented on nesting beaches and through fisheries management. Bycatch in commercial and recreational [fishing gear](#) continues to be the biggest threat facing Kemp's

ridley sea turtles."

Leatherbacks, the largest [sea turtles](#), eat mostly jellyfish, which is problematic when plastic trash resembles jellyfish.

Leatherbacks can grow more than 6 feet long and weigh up to 1,400 pounds; and they daily eat twice their weight, according to the American Museum of Natural History website.

"In recent studies, nearly half of all leatherbacks examined had plastic or cellophane in their stomachs," the website said. "It's not known how much plastic it takes to kill a leatherback, but two facts are clear: No animal can digest plastic, and the amount of plastic in the oceans is increasing drastically every day."

2023 The Virginian-Pilot. Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: Outer Banks beaches saw a busy sea turtle nesting season (2023, November 6) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-11-outer-banks-beaches-busy-sea.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.