



Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program

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Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

Loggerhead Sea Turtle *Caretta caretta*

State Status: **Threatened**
Federal Status: **Threatened**

DESCRIPTION: The shell is long, heart-shaped, and uniformly reddish brown. As the name implies, this turtle has a noticeably large head. The large head supports powerful jaws which enable the Loggerhead to feed on hard-shelled prey, including moon snails, channeled and knobbed whelks, and a variety of crab species. Adults are about 3 feet long and 250 pounds, making this is the second largest of the hard-shelled sea turtles. Their front flippers have dark streaks and two claws on the anterior end.

SIMILAR SPECIES: Nearly all Loggerheads in Massachusetts are juveniles about 60 or 70 pounds. They are much larger than the young Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtles, and have proportionately much larger heads than Green or Hawksbill Sea Turtles.

HABITAT AND RANGE: The Loggerhead is the most common sea turtle along the east coast of the U.S. They make extensive migrations from their nesting beaches to foraging areas on the continental shelf, and move northward during the summer as the water temperatures increase to 68-73° Fahrenheit. These temperatures allow a few adults to occasionally move as far north as Long Island Sound, the waters south of Cape Cod, and rarely around the Cape. They are found throughout temperate and tropical regions of the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans. Many migrate to the Bahamas in the winter; however, their primary habitat includes the southeastern coast of the United States, extending to South America and eastward toward Africa and the Mediterranean. On the U.S. Atlantic Coast, Loggerheads nest on open beaches from North Carolina to the west coast of Florida. A few nest each year as far north as Virginia, and have rarely nested in Maryland and New Jersey.

LIFE-CYCLE AND BEHAVIOR: The Loggerhead Sea Turtle has a lifespan estimated to be 50 years or more; however, actual documentation of age is rare.



Photo courtesy of the National Park Service

Loggerheads are completely adapted to marine life and only return to beaches for nesting between the months of April through September, with a peak during June and July. Typically, there is an incubation period of 46 to 65 days. Hatchlings emerge at night and follow the reflection from light on the water to locate the sea. Females usually produce 2 to 3 clutches per year and reach sexual maturity between 12 and 30 years. Hatchlings and juveniles live on the surface of the ocean, allowing the current to carry them through the eastern Atlantic. At about 12 years old, the turtles return to the southeastern United States where they feed on mollusks, crabs, and invertebrates.

THREATS: Loggerhead nests are threatened by raccoons, dogs, shore erosion, and beach development. In some areas outside of the U.S., the eggs are still collected for human consumption. Hatchlings are preyed upon by mammals and sea birds, and light pollution on the beach can disrupt their journey to the ocean by interfering with the natural reflection of light. At sea, Loggerheads are threatened by commercial fishing nets, including trawls and gillnets, as well as longlines. In addition, plastic bags and other marine debris is

A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan

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sometimes mistaken as prey and consumed. In Massachusetts, the greatest threats are cold-stunning of turtles that are trapped in Cape Cod Bay as winter approaches, and boat strikes.

MANAGEMENT: Turtle Exclusion Devices (TEDs) are now being used by commercial fisheries to reduce the capture, and enhance the escape, of sea turtles captured in trawl nets. In response to the cold-stunning phenomenon, staff and volunteers of MassAudubon's Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary mount an annual effort to search the beaches after every high tide during the late fall and early winter. All of the recovered turtles are brought to the Sanctuary for evaluation and emergency care. Live turtles are then taken to the New England Aquarium where they are given more rigorous medical evaluations and treatment. In years with larger numbers of stranded turtles, many are distributed as soon as they are stable to other aquaria and care facilities as far away as Texas and Florida.

REFERENCES:

Loggerhead Sea Turtle (*Caretta caretta*). U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. URL: [Species Profile for Loggerhead sea turtle \(Caretta caretta\)](#)

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