

LOGGERHEAD

Caretta caretta

Order: Testudines
Family: Cheloniidae
FNAI Ranks: G3/S3
U.S. Status: Threatened
FL Status: Threatened

Status applies to eggs as well as turtles. Shrimp trawlers must be fitted with excluder devices to release marine turtles.

Some local ordinances regulate beachfront lighting and beach driving.



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hatchling © Blair Witherington

Description: A large sea turtle with a reddish brown carapace (upper shell) and large, blunt head with yellow cheeks; front limbs reddish brown and modified as flippers. Carapace with five or more large scales (costal scutes) on each side, the first one touching the nuchal scute (small scale over neck). Lower shell (plastron) yellow and usually without a single small scale at its posterior tip. Bridge usually with three large scales, occasionally four, and these lack pores. Two pairs of scales (prefrontals) between eyes. Adults 28 - 49 in. (70 - 125 cm) carapace length, 170 - 350 lbs. (77 - 159 kg). Hatchlings 1.6- 1.9 in. (41 - 48 mm) shell length, with three lengthwise ridges (keels) on upper shell, and two on lower; brown, tan, or light to dark gray above and often lighter below.

Similar Species: The reddish brown coloration is distinctive among sea turtles. Hawksbill and green turtles (*Eretmochelys imbricata* and *Chelonia mydas*; see species accounts) lack contact between first costal and nuchal scales. Adult Kemp's ridley (*Lepidochelys kempii*; see species account) is

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smaller, has a gray to olive-green, nearly circular shell with four large scales (each with a posterior pore) on the bridge, usually a single small scale at rear edge of plastron, and a cusped, parrot-like beak.

Habitat: Marine coastal and oceanic waters; nest on coastal sand beaches, often near the dune line, sufficiently high to avoid tidal inundation. Hatchlings use offshore floating sargassum mats; juveniles frequent coastal bays, inlets, and lagoons.

Seasonal Occurrence: Present in Florida waters year-round, but more commonly observed during warmer months when turtles are more active. Nesting occurs late April - early September; hatchlings emerge from nests and head toward the sea July - November.

Florida Distribution: Coastal waters statewide. Nesting occurs along the entire Atlantic coast, in the Keys, and along the Gulf coast from Pinellas County south and Franklin County west, with the greatest numbers from Brevard to Broward counties.

Range-wide Distribution: Temperate and subtropical marine waters worldwide. Nesting in the eastern U.S. is principally confined to Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina, with smaller numbers from North Carolina to Virginia.

Conservation Status: Some nesting beaches are on military lands and state, federal, and private conservation lands on both Atlantic and Gulf coasts. State-designated aquatic preserves partially protect some feeding and developmental habitat.

Protection and Management: Protect beaches and adjacent uplands statewide from development and coastal armoring. Protect estuaries and coastal waters from pollution, dumping of entangling debris, dredging, over-use by boats and ships, and other disturbance. Focus extreme attention on Brevard and Indian River counties. While Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs) have reduced mortality in shrimp nets, greater regulation of long-line and gill-net fisheries is needed to prevent hooking mortality and incidental drowning. Enact or strengthen beach lighting ordinances in all counties that support nesting to reduce deaths of newly emerged hatchlings that become distracted by artificial lights.

Selected References: Ashton and Ashton 1991, Bartlett and Bartlett 1999, Conant and Collins 1991, Dodd 1988, Ernst et al. 1994, Moler (ed.) 1992.