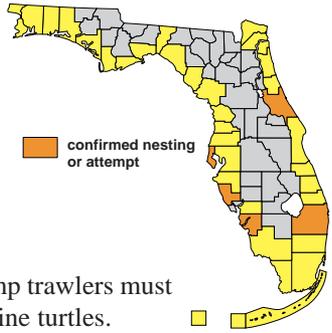


# KEMP'S RIDLEY

## *Lepidochelys kempii*

**Order:** Testudines  
**Family:** Cheloniidae  
**FNAI Ranks:** G1/S1  
**U.S. Status:** Endangered  
**FL Status:** Endangered

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.



hatchling  
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juvenile  
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**Description:** A small to medium-sized sea turtle with a nearly circular shell. Front limbs modified as flippers. Upper shell (carapace) olive-green to gray, with five large scales (costal scutes) on each side, the first one touching the nuchal scale (small scale over neck). Lower shell (plastron) yellow to white and usually with a single, small scale (the interanal) at its posterior tip. Bridge with four (rarely five) large scales, each with a pore near the rear edge. Adults reach 23 - 28 in. (58 - 71 cm) shell length and 70 - 100 lbs. (32 - 45 kg). Young: almost completely dark gray, a light gray streak along the rear edge of each flipper, three spined ridges (keels) on upper shell and four on lower. Hatchlings measure about 1.5 - 1.75 in. (38 - 44 mm) shell length.

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## *Lepidochelys kempii*

**Similar Species:** All other sea turtles grow substantially larger and have more elongate shells. Loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*; see species account) is distinguished by its reddish-brown shell, large head, and absence of both the small interanal scale (usually) and pores on the enlarged bridge scales. Hawksbill and green turtles (*Eretmochelys imbricata* and *Chelonia mydas*; see species accounts) have only four pairs of large costal scutes, with the first not touching the nuchal. Hawksbill also has overlapping scutes, pointed beak, and ridge on back; green turtle bears only one elongate pair of prefrontal scales between the eyes.

**Habitat:** Marine coastal waters, usually with sand or mud bottoms; nests (rarely in Florida) on sandy beaches. Juveniles frequent bays, inlets, and lagoons.

**Seasonal Occurrence:** Present in Florida waters year-round.

**Florida Distribution:** Coastal waters statewide, though rare off southeastern coast. Waters along the entire Gulf coast are important for growth of young. Apparently did not historically nest in Florida, but eight nests have been recorded since 1989, possibly a result of conservation efforts. Whether the ridley will become a regular nester in Florida is unknown.

**Range-wide Distribution:** Chiefly a turtle of the Gulf of Mexico, with nesting nearly restricted to beaches of northern Mexico and southernmost Texas. Immature turtles often migrate along the Gulf and Atlantic coasts as far north as New England.

**Conservation Status:** State aquatic preserves partially protect some feeding and developmental habitat. The largely immature population segment using Florida waters is threatened by coastal habitat destruction and degradation, including pollution of estuaries and marine waters as well as coastal development. Direct mortality of older immature animals that drown in commercial shrimp nets is considered the principal threat.

**Protection and Management:** Continued use of Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs), which have reduced incidental drowning in shrimp nets, is essential for species' recovery. Also must protect coastal waters from pollution, dredging, and synthetic debris, and limit coastal development. 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, Ernst et al. 1994, Moler (ed.) 1992, Ross et al. 1989.