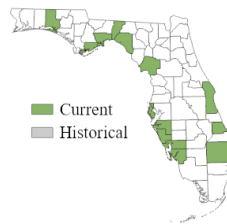


KEMP'S RIDLEY SEA TURTLE

Lepidochelys kempii



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

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.

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 but does not typically nest in the state.

Florida Distribution: Restricted to coastal waters, including Panhandle lagoons. A few recent nestings (1989, 1994: Pinellas County; 1989: Palm Beach County; 1996: Lee County, Volusia County) may be transitory.

Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle

Lepidochelys kempii

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: Maintain beaches in as natural a state as is possible.

References: Ashton and Ashton 1991, Bartlett and Bartlett 1999, Conant and Collins 1991, Ernst et al. 1994, Moler (ed.) 1992, Ross et al. 1989.



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juvenile © Richard D. Bartlett