

Loggerhead Seaturtle

Caretta caretta (Linnaeus 1758)



TAXONOMY. Although two subspecies have been described, *C. c. caretta* (Atlantic) and *C. c. gigas* (Pacific), no subspecies are currently recognized.

DESCRIPTION. The Loggerhead is a large, hard-shelled marine turtle that may reach 2 m (6.5 ft.) carapace length and 450 kg (990 lbs.). Most, however, are smaller. The head is relatively large with two pairs of prefrontal scales. Its carapace is elongate and high in the front, with a keel along the center line and coarse serrations along the back edge. There are five or more non-overlapping costal shields on each side of the shell. Carapace color is reddish brown to olive with yellow borders on some scutes. The plastron is cream to yellow and has two longitudinal ridges except in older adults. Males have a large curved claw on each forelimb and a much longer tail (extends past tips of back-stretched hind flippers) than females.

DISTRIBUTION. Loggerhead Seaturtles inhabit the warmer parts of the Pacific, Atlantic and Indian oceans, and the Mediterranean and Caribbean seas. They range into temperate

zones in summer. Major nesting areas include the southeastern U.S., Mexico, Oman, Australia, South Africa, the Mediterranean, and southern Japan, the only known breeding area in the North Pacific.

The Loggerhead is a casual visitor to Alaska waters, reported here at least twice. One was a carcass found on Shuyak Island north of Kodiak in December, 1991. The other was a sighting near Cape Georgena, Kruzof Island, northwest of Sitka in July, 1993.

NATURAL HISTORY. Loggerheads mostly inhabit bays, estuaries, lagoons, and open seas over continental shelves. Nesting occurs at lower latitudes in summer, usually on continental shores or occasionally island beaches above the high-tide line. Their diet includes crabs, mollusks, sponges, jellyfish, fish, eelgrass, and seaweed.

CONSERVATION. Nesting trends of this species suggest general decline, with the most significant threats being coastal development, commercial fisheries, and pollution. The Loggerhead Seaturtle is currently listed as



threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

REMARKS. Mitochondrial DNA data from major nesting areas suggest that most breeding colonies have diagnostic genetic characteristics, indicating strong natal homing by nesting females. Loggerheads may take up to 30 years to reach sexual maturity.

SELECT REFERENCES. Bowen et al. 1994, Dodd 1990, Hodge and Wing 2000.

Green Seaturtle

Chelonia mydas (Linnaeus 1758)



TAXONOMY. Eastern Pacific populations of *Chelonia* are regarded by some authors as a distinct species, *C. agassizii* (Black Seaturtle), as a subspecies of *C. mydas* by others, and synonymous with *C. mydas* by authorities who suggest it not be taxonomically recognized until more definitive work is done.

DESCRIPTION. Adult Green Seaturtles typically reach 1 m (3.3 ft.) carapace length and 180 kg (36 lbs.) weight. The carapace is olive to brown or black in color and may be mottled. It is broad and flattened with no keel and has only slight serrations along the back edge. The plastron is clear white or yellowish. Males have a long, prehensile tail tipped with a horny nail, a long costal claw on the front flipper, and a longer, narrower carapace than females.

Green Seaturtles can be distinguished from other hard-shelled marine turtles by their four costal scutes, and one pair of prefrontal scales between the eyes.

DISTRIBUTION. This species ranges throughout tropical portions of the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian oceans. Nesting in Pacific populations occurs in winter or spring on beaches in areas such as Hawaii, Mexico and central America.

Generally a warm-water species, Green Seaturtles occur in higher temperate latitudes, perhaps due to drifting in ocean currents in conjunction with above-normal sea temperatures during El Nino weather events.

The Green Seaturtle is rare to Alaska waters, reported at least nine times between 1960 and 1998. Records of beached carcasses and sightings have ranged from the Alexander Archipelago northward and westward to near Cordova, Seldovia, and Homer. Most (eight of nine sightings) were found from September through November. This was the only species of marine turtle reported in Alaska waters between 1993 and 1998.

NATURAL HISTORY. Green Seaturtles are found in shallow waters with an abundance of sea grasses and algae, their preferred foods, and open seas during migrations. It is the only marine turtle that commonly leaves the water to bask. Females nest every two to four years, up to eight times a season. Sexual maturity takes 20-30 years.

CONSERVATION. Populations have declined dramatically over the last 50 years, although not to the same degree as other marine turtle



species. A primary cause of decline is commercial harvest for eggs, meat and leather. The breeding populations off Florida and the Pacific coast of Mexico are listed as endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act, while all others are considered threatened.

REMARKS. The common name of this turtle comes from the color of its fat.

SELECT REFERENCES. Hodge and Wing 2000, Karl and Bowen 1999.