

HARBOR ISLAND SEA TURTLE PROJECT

TYPES OF SEA TURTLES THAT NEST ON SOUTH CAROLINA BEACHES

Sea turtles vary in size from an average of 75 to 800 lbs. Modified for living in the open ocean, they have paddle-like front limbs for swimming. The thick neck and head cannot be drawn back into the body. Sea turtles also have special respiratory mechanisms and organs to excrete excess salt taken in with seawater when they feed. There are many informative websites on the natural history of sea turtles in South Carolina.

Around the globe, there are seven species of sea turtles. In South Carolina, there are four species of sea turtles found off of our coasts during different times of the year:

The Loggerhead sea turtle is the most common turtle to nest in South Carolina. This turtle is named for its disproportionately large head and feeds on crabs, mollusks, and jellyfish.

The Kemp's Ridley sea turtle is the rarest sea turtle in the world. They primarily nest on one beach on the Gulf coast of Mexico and are the smallest species of sea turtle. Scientists have been trying to transplant Kemp's Ridley eggs to Texas to establish a new nesting colony.

The Leatherback is the largest sea turtle in the world and can be over 6 feet long and weigh 1400 lbs. It does not have a hard shell, but rather a leather-like carapace with bony ridges underneath the skin. The Leatherback makes long migrations to and from its nesting beaches in the tropics to as far north as Canada. Jellyfish are the favored prey of these turtles.

The Green sea turtle is the second most common turtle here. Green turtles are the only herbivorous (plant-eating) sea turtles. They feed on sea grasses in shallow areas. The lower jaw is serrated to help cut the sea grasses it eats.

