

Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtles in the Gulf of Mexico

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The Kemp's Ridley sea turtle, *Lepidochelys kempii*, is just one of seven marine turtle species in the world, and five that are found in Texas. An adult's carapace (upper shell) averages just two feet long, and they weigh 70-100 pounds. This wins them the title of the world's smallest sea turtle. For comparison, the world's largest sea turtle species, the leatherback, grows up to six feet in length and can weigh up to 2,000 pounds!

The Kemp's-Ridley Sea Turtle has a green-gray carapace and the underside of its shell, the plastron, is a cream color. Their heads are triangularly shaped with a beak, which they use to eat their favorite meal, crabs, but they also eat shrimp, jellyfish, sea stars, and clams.

Females leave the water to nest on the beaches from Bolivar Peninsula all the way to Vera Cruz, Mexico. Most sea turtle species consider nesting to be a solitary activity done at night. The Kemp's Ridley, however, nests during the day, sometimes in large gatherings called "arribadas" or "arribazones."

During nesting, females use their flippers to dig a hole in the sand in which they will lay as many as 100 eggs. The hatchlings will emerge after approximately two months, using a temporary tooth called a caruncle to break open their eggshells. Weighing just as much as an empty soda can, the darkly colored hatchlings make a run for the water as soon as they're out of their shells. The females will, with any luck, one day return to nest on the same beach they were born.

Unfortunately, the Kemp's Ridley is one of the most endangered sea turtles in the world. They are currently listed as critically endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. Marine debris is a common hazard for sea turtles as they can get entangled in fishing line, ingest lures,

or mistake floating grocery bags for tasty jellyfish. They also face predation from off-leash dogs, raccoons, crabs, and even humans, who will often consume the eggs as a delicacy. The turtles are at risk due to other human activities as well, including boat strikes and eggs and hatchlings getting crushed. Perhaps their largest threat is accidental capture by fishing and shrimping nets.

One of the biggest ways everyone can help Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtles is by picking up any trash that they see at the beach and practicing the four R's of trash reduction: reduce, reuse, repurpose, and recycle. Keeping debris out of the ocean is an important way we can help conserve the Kemp's Ridley and other sea life!

Looking for a turtley awesome adventure? Bring your friends and family to Seaside Safari November 4th from 9am to 12 pm! This is a free event hosted by SPLASh at the Texas City Dike. There will be education booths from Texas Marine Stranding Network, Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, Black Cat GIS, and the Houston Zoo! Come clean the beach with us to help protect wildlife like the Kemp's Ridley sea turtle while you learn!

Photo Credit: U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service - Northeast Region

Photo caption: A Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle making its way back to the ocean.



1Free Public Domain Photo Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle Hatchlings