

Turtle Nesting Story



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It's a hot summer night with a breeze coming off the water. The large turtle uses her **flippers** to push herself on shore. As a **loggerhead**, the most common species of turtles whose **range** includes the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean nearby, she has come to lay her eggs near the sandy dunes. Like most turtles in her species, she has returned near the beach where she was born. The moon is high at midnight on this July night in Sandbridge in Virginia Beach. After **mating** offshore, the female turtle swims to the water's edge and crawls. Now on shore, she no longer must hold her breath as she does in the water. She uses her flippers in alternate movements, leaving distinctive tracks in the sand. In the water she moves gracefully, but on land her 250 lbs. weigh her down. An **adaptation** that makes swimming in the water easier, flippers make movement on land slow and awkward. Out of the water, tears from her **salt glands** stream down her face, washing sand from her eyes. These tears help her remove excess salt from her body, an important task for an animal that spends almost its entire life in salt water. Her large head resembles a log and her **carapace**, or top of her **shell**, is reddish-brown. About three feet in length, the carapace is formed from her bones and covered in modified **scales**, called **scutes**. It's very protective, but also very heavy. Using her rear flippers, she slowly digs a nest about two feet deep. She lays her **clutch** of 120 eggs in the hole, each the size and shape of a golf ball, but flimsy, not hard like a chicken's egg. After all of her eggs are laid, she covers the nest with sand and slowly crawls back to shore, never to return to her babies. Her journey for **nesting** on shore to lay eggs and then return lasts about an hour. She will do this a couple more times this summer, and then not again for a few years. Back at sea, she will swim, eat jellyfish and crabs, and fear only humans and large sharks.

The eggs she laid in the sand stay in their nest for a little over 2 months. Protected by the sand, the small turtles form from fertilized eggs in the eggshells, growing bones, shells, lungs and other organs, as they prepare to hatch and scurry to the water. While in their

eggshells, the turtles may be dug up Turtle Nesting Story by raccoons or foxes or attacked in the sand by ghost crabs and ants. Beach erosion and vehicles driven on the beaches may also crush or expose the nests. As **reptiles**, the sex of the turtles is determined by temperature. Females are produced in higher temperature, while males are from lower temperatures. If turtle eggshells are uncovered, the babies die in their shell before fully formed. Thankfully, most of these babies hatch, well protected from predators and human activity.

After the 60-day **incubation** period, the turtles who have survived their first test – not being eaten or crushed in their eggshells – dig their way out of the nest. As **hatchlings**, about 2 inches long, they emerge at night and instinctively look for the reflection of the moon off the sea. Moving as fast as possible, their flippers flapping around them, they try to reach the safety of the water before birds and dogs can catch and eat them. Some of their brothers and sisters, however, may be eaten or led astray by following the lights from buildings on land.

Once the turtles reach the safety of the water, they swim out to sea. Finding floating sea grasses to hide in they can feed safely, **camouflaged** from **predators**, including large fish and sharks. As they grow and their shells become larger and harder, the animals that can eat them become fewer, finally narrowing down to just large sharks. Humans, however, are a threat their entire lives and as an **endangered species**, loggerhead turtles are on the verge of extinction. From in the eggshell to swimming as large adults, **human interactions** are usually dangerous for the turtles. Boat propellers can cut, and fishing nets drown turtles small and large. Trash in the water may resemble some of the turtles' favorite foods, including plastic bags that float, bobbing rhythmically through the water like jellyfish. Because of all of these threats throughout their lives, only about 1 in 1,000 turtle eggs grows into a mature adult, able to mate and lay eggs. Hopefully one of the eggs laid by the female loggerhead this summer will live to have its own babies, but even that is unlikely. Thankfully, she will be able to lay eggs for many more years, and hopefully inspire any humans who see her on these beach journeys.

Turtle Nesting Vocabulary

Adaptation – A change in the structure or activity of an organism that produces a better adjustment to its environment, thus enhancing its ability to survive and reproduce.

Camouflage – A means of concealment or blending in with natural surroundings.

Carapace – The top (dorsal) part of the turtle's shell, usually covered by scutes.

Clutch – A group of eggs laid in a single nest.

Endangered Species – A species that verges on extinction in all or part of its range.

Flippers – A broad, flat limb used for swimming. The front and rear flippers of sea turtles are attached to well-developed muscles for long distance water travel.

Hatchlings – Sea turtles newly emerged from their eggshells.

Human Interaction – Encounter between a human and a wild animal within its natural habitat.

Incubation Period – The number of days it takes an egg to hatch after it has been laid.

Loggerhead – An endangered sea turtle that spends time in and around the Chesapeake Bay. Named for its large head, it has a reddish-brown carapace, weighs 200-350 lbs., and is a carnivore favoring jellyfish, crabs, and other shellfish.

Mating – Male and female joining to create a fertilized embryo.

Nesting – The process of depositing eggs in a nest. Sea turtles deposit their eggs in a bell-shaped hole they dig in the sand.

Predator – An animal that preys upon another.

Range – The geographical region in which a plant or animal normally lives or grows.

Reptile – Any of various cold-blooded, usually egg-laying vertebrates having an external covering of scales and breathing by means of lungs.

Salt Glands – Glands in the head of a sea turtle that remove salt from the body through tears from the eyes.

Scales – A small plate-like structure forming the external covering of fishes, reptiles, and certain mammals.

Scutes – Horny plates that cover the bones of a turtle's shell, except in leatherback sea turtles.

Shell – The hard outer covering that protects certain organisms.

Turtle Nesting Story Questions

- 1) The most common sea turtle seen around the Chesapeake Bay is the _____.
- 2) Some adaptations that make life in the salt water easier include _____ to swim, and _____ to remove salt from the body.
- 3) Sea turtles are reptiles, so they use lungs to _____, lay _____, and have modified _____ named scutes.
- 4) Predators may attack sea turtles their entire lives. During their incubation period, eggshells may be eaten by raccoons and ghost crabs. Hatchlings instinctively follow the reflection of the _____ on the water but may be eaten by _____. In the water, the colors of their shells help _____, or blend with, the floating sea grasses. As adults, the predators large enough to attack turtles are _____.
- 5) Human interaction can be deadly for sea turtles. Some examples are: _____

- 6) It is estimated that very few sea turtles survive long enough to lay eggs themselves. One estimate is that only 1 in _____ return to mate and lay eggs.