

Background on Sea Turtles

Five of the seven species of sea turtles call Virginia waters home between the months of April and November. All five species are listed on the U.S. List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants and classified as either “Threatened” or “Endangered”.

It is estimated that anywhere between five and ten thousand sea turtles enter the Chesapeake Bay during the spring and summer months. Of these the most common visitor is the loggerhead followed by the Kemp’s ridley, leatherback and green. The least common of the five species is the hawksbill.

The **Loggerhead** is the largest hard-shelled sea turtle often reaching weights of 1000 lbs. However, the ones typically sighted in Virginia’s waters range in size from 50 to 300 lbs. The diet of the loggerhead is extensive including jellies, sponges, bivalves, gastropods, squid and shrimp. While visiting the Bay waters the loggerhead dines almost exclusively on horseshoe crabs. Virginia is the northern most nesting grounds for the loggerhead. Because the temperature of the nest dictates the sex of the turtle it is often thought that the few nests found in Virginia are producing predominately male offspring. Once the male turtles enter the water they will never return to land in their lifetime. Loggerheads are listed as a “Threatened” species.



The **Kemp’s ridley** sea turtle is the second most frequent visitor in Virginia waters. It is the smallest of the species off Virginia’s coast reaching a maximum weight of just over 100 lbs. The specimens sited in Virginia are often less than 30 lbs. The ridley’s diet consists of both mollusks and crustaceans; and its favorite food when visiting the Chesapeake Bay is the blue crab. The Kemp’s ridley nests exclusively on the beaches of Rancho Nuevo, Mexico. Over a 2 – 4 day period all the female ridleys come onto the beaches to nest; a natural phenomenon of nesting in mass

referred to Background on Sea Turtles as “arribadas”, Spanish for “arrival”. The ridley population has seen a significant decline because of shrimp trawling and nest robbing and is listed as a “Critically Endangered” species.

The **Leatherback** is the most unusual sea turtle to visit Virginia's waters. Unlike the other turtles the leatherback does not have a hard shell, but rather it is covered by skin that appears to be leathery. Although the leatherback spends most of its life in the open ocean, it is recorded that several are spotted in the Bay every summer. The leatherback's nesting grounds range include the West Indies, Bahamas and Central America. In the U.S., leatherbacks nest in Florida and as far north as North Carolina. The leatherback is listed as an "Endangered" species.



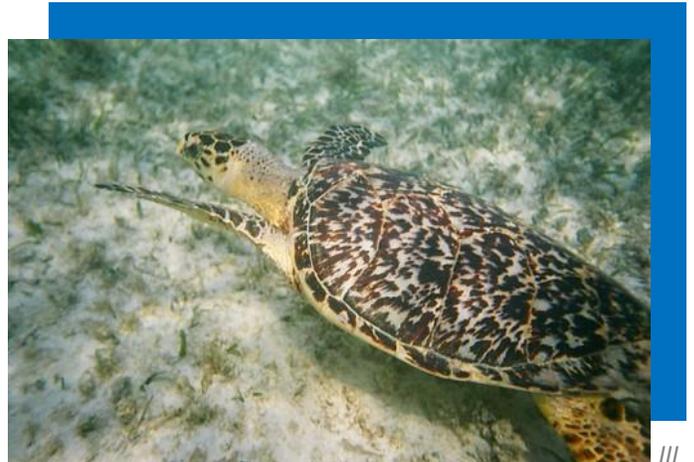
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Typically, the **Green Sea Turtle** comes to the Chesapeake Bay as juveniles. This is due in part to the fact that they are more carnivorous as juveniles feeding on jellies, crustaceans and mollusks. As adults greens will feed primarily on submerged aquatic vegetation (SAVs). Greens will nest on the beaches of the West Indies and the Caribbean shores of South and Central America. On rare occasions greens may nest on the coasts of the Gulf of Mexico and Florida. The green sea turtles name

was derived from the color of the turtle's fat, which is green in color. The greens are a high valued food item; as a result they were intensely harvested and are now listed as "Endangered".

The least common visitor is the **Hawksbill**; it is more tropical than any other sea turtle species. The hawksbill is omnivorous eating a wide variety of food including corals, urchins, mollusks, fish and crustaceans, although their primary diet consists of sponges. There is only one confirmed find in Virginia's waters. The hawksbill will nest on the beaches from Florida to Mexico. Hawksbills are listed as "Critically Endangered" due in part to the hawksbill's beautiful "tortoise shell" being a significant part of commerce.



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