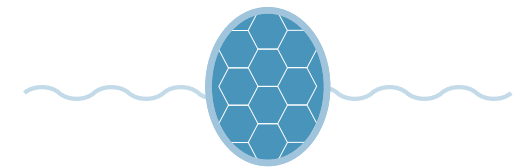




SEA TURTLES  
ON THE  
TEXAS GULF COAST

TEXT BY  
MELISSA GASKILL

# Reptilian Grace



## Texans love sea turtles,

and sea turtles love Texas. Five species—green, loggerhead, hawksbill, leatherback, and Kemp’s ridley—have nested along our 400-odd miles of coast in recent years.

Padre Island National Seashore is the epicenter of Texas turtle activity. It’s the only place in the state where nests from all Gulf of Mexico turtle species have been found, and it’s the base for sea turtle conservation programs that provide the public a chance to observe the ancient species in their natural habitat.

Every summer, from May to August, the park’s Division of Sea Turtle Science and Recovery holds public releases of baby sea turtles, mostly Kemp’s ridley hatchlings from eggs that were collected from beach nests and then reared in a local incubation facility. I’ve visited half-a-dozen times through the years to watch the little critters scurry down the beach to catch a wave and start their long swim out to floating mats of sargassum, marine algae that provides shelter and prey.

During the hour or so it takes for all of the baby turtles to make the trek from their nests to the water, park staff members bring around a hatchling to give visitors a close look and photo opportunity. In 2014, nearly 12,000 people attended 24 public releases.

Children and adults alike light up at the sight of the hatchlings, says Paula Baker, a veterinarian from Austin who has volunteered at the seashore for the past five years. “It’s very rewarding to be part of a group that’s trying to bring back a nearly extinct animal, an animal that’s almost extinct because of human impact,” Baker says. “It’s nice to have a part in trying to reverse that.”

*Loggerhead sea turtle at Flower Garden  
Banks National Marine Sanctuary*





# The spectacle of the hatchling

releases takes on greater meaning when considered in the context of the challenges facing sea turtles. Kemp's ridleys, the most common nesting turtles at Padre Island, and four other Gulf sea turtle species are listed as threatened or endangered. Threats to their survival include development, fishing gear entanglement, pollution, poaching for food in many countries, and the effects of climate change—warmer sand affects hatchlings, warmer seas can change the abundance and location of food sources, and shifting ocean currents influence the drifting of young sea turtles and the migratory patterns of adults.

Kemp's ridleys, the smallest sea turtles at no more than 100 pounds, are found in greater nesting numbers in Texas than anywhere else in the United States. They live throughout the Gulf of Mexico and along the U.S. Atlantic coast, where they eat crabs, fish, jellyfish, and mollusks. Kemp's are the only sea turtles that lay their eggs in the daytime, nesting April through July. Kemp's ridley nests in Texas rose steadily from 1995 to 2009. That trend then reversed, however, with decreases in 2010—the year of a 4.9-million-barrel oil spill in the Gulf—and in 2013 and 2014.

Scientists aren't sure how the 2015 Kemp's nesting season will turn out.

"When nesting was steadily increasing 12 to 19 percent per year, we could make predictions," says Donna Shaver, chief of the Division of Sea Turtle Science and Recovery at Padre Island National Seashore. "Now that this trend is broken, it is difficult to say. We hope that more nests will be found during 2015, but we could have a third consecutive year of decreases."

The good news is that around the world, responsible sea turtle tourism contributes to their conservation and protection. Tourism provides economic alternatives for locals and makes turtles worth more alive than dead. I had my first sea turtle encounter 15 years ago in Baja California Sur, Mexico, where fishermen who previously captured them for food now patrol nesting beaches for their protection. After that, I sought out the interesting reptiles whenever I traveled and eventually wrote a book about well-managed sea turtle ecotourism programs around the world.

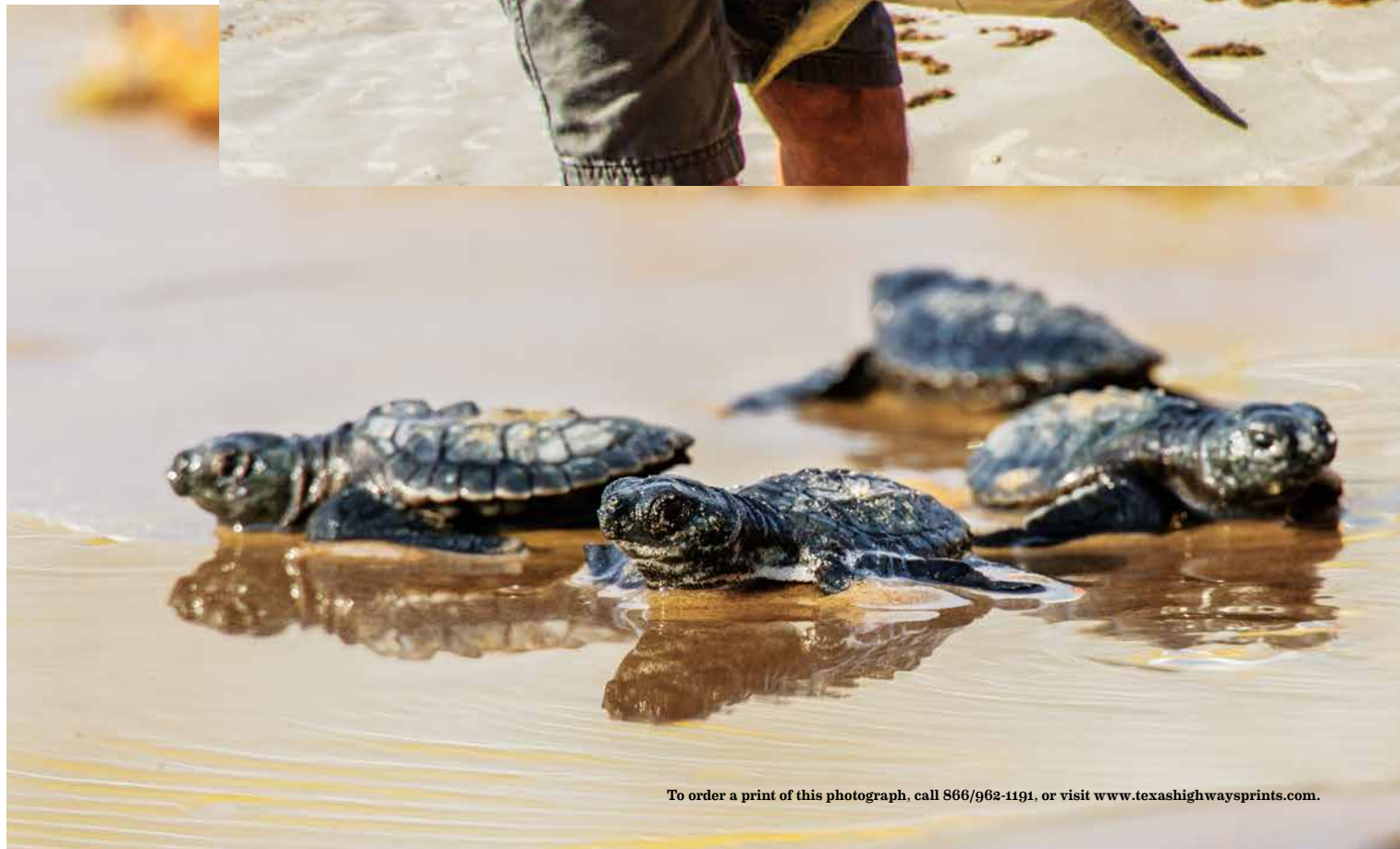
The protection effort at Padre Island National Seashore relies on volunteers to help monitor 80 miles of beach for nests near the dune line. The public also finds many of them, so keep your eyes peeled. The Texas coast hosted 119 Kemp's ridley nests in 2014, 72 of them at the national seashore. Volunteers attend training in February or March and sign up for patrol shifts April through July. "Finding a nesting turtle is an experience of a lifetime," Baker says. "It's a sight very few people have had the privilege to see."

Texas provides other opportunities to spot sea turtles in the wild. Mustang Island State Park, between Port Aransas and North Padre Island, offers three miles of beach, campgrounds, a paddling trail, picnic tables, and fishing jetties, which are a good place to spot green sea turtles.

The only herbivorous sea turtles, greens weigh about 325 pounds

## MEET THE TURTLES

*At right and at bottom corner: On Mustang Island, the UT Marine Science Institute releases green sea turtles after rehabilitation. Below: At Padre Island National Seashore, newly released Kemp's ridley hatchlings head for the surf.*







as adults and nest from June to September in the southeastern United States, mostly in Florida, and on the coasts of Mexico and Costa Rica. Fifteen green turtle nests were found on the Texas coast in 2013, but none in 2014.

Mustang Island park rangers offer regular programs on sea turtles, as well as beach walks and exploration of jetty life, with the common bonus of spotting young green sea turtles nibbling on algae and sea grass. Young green sea turtles also hang out around Packery Channel on the southern end of Mustang Island and near the ship channel jetties at the northern end of Mustang Island, north of I.B. Magee Park in Port Aransas.

→  
turn to see  
MORE PLACES  
to see  
SEA TURTLES

Although the only hawksbill nest documented on the Texas coast occurred in 1998 at Padre Island National Seashore, divers and deep-sea fishermen glimpse hawksbills—distinguished by their beautiful amber shells with black and brown markings—around artificial reefs or offshore platforms. Sightings of hawksbills and loggerheads—400-pound reptiles

with large heads and powerful conch-crunching jaws—are a trip highlight for those who dive the coral reefs at the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary, located 100 miles off the Texas coast. Two loggerhead nests were recorded on the Texas coast in 2014 and 13 in 2013. When it comes to leatherbacks, a 2008 discovery of the sea turtle's nests at Big Shell Beach on Padre Island is the only known presence of the species in Texas since the 1930s.

Sea turtle encounters create wonderful memories, and once you've had one, you'll probably want more, as I did. Beyond their tourist appeal, sea turtles are important to healthy oceans and coasts, too. For example, green sea turtles crop sea grass beds and help keep those important ecosystems healthy. In many places around the world, unhatched eggs and shells contribute important nutrients to beach ecosystems, and hatchlings serve as prey for a variety of other animals.



**FROM TINY TO MIGHTY**  
Clockwise from right: A rehabilitated green sea turtle released on Mustang Island; a loggerhead sea turtle at Flower Garden Banks; volunteers practice measuring Kemp's ridley nests on South Padre Island.



## ESSENTIALS SEA TURTLE SIGHTINGS

*Padre Island National Seashore and Mustang Island State Park are two of the best places to view sea turtles in the wild:*

**Padre Island National Seashore** hatchling releases are held May to August. For dates, check the park's website or call the turtle hotline, 361/949-7163. To volunteer, call 361/949-8173 ext. 268. The seashore opens daily, and the visitor center opens 9-5 daily except Christmas. Entrance fee: \$10 per vehicle, good for seven days. [www.nps.gov/pais](http://www.nps.gov/pais).

**Mustang Island State Park** opens daily, 7 a.m.-10 p.m. Entrance fee is \$5 for adults, children 12 and younger are free. Primitive campsites cost \$10 per night; sites with water and electricity cost \$20 per night. Call 361/749-5246; [tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/mustang-island](http://tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/mustang-island).

"Just as important, though, every creature plays a role in a healthy ecosystem and its loss can have unforeseen consequences," adds Shaver. "These creatures have existed for four million years, and human activity nearly eliminated them. Our job is to right a wrong by protecting the turtle's place in the web of life." ★

*Melissa Gaskill traveled throughout the United States and five other countries researching A Worldwide Travel Guide to Sea Turtles, published by Texas A&M University Press in 2014. Watching and helping with hatchling releases are some of her fondest travel memories.*



WHERE TO SEE CAPTIVE  
SEA TURTLES IN TEXAS

# Get Captivated!

While nothing matches meeting a wild sea turtle on a beach or in the ocean, coming face-to-face with one in a rehabilitation or educational facility is also a thrill. It's also easier and drier. Here are several places to see captive sea turtles in Texas:

## SEA TURTLE, INC.

This nonprofit center on South Padre Island treats injured turtles and offers daily presentations to meet its non-releasable residents, including one-flipped Allison, a green sea turtle that wears a special wetsuit with a dorsal fin. The open-air facility has informative displays and a gift shop selling goods that provide alternate income to those living near nesting beaches around the world. Rehab releases on a nearby beach are scheduled a couple of weeks in advance, while hatchling releases are held as conditions merit.

6617 Padre Blvd. Opens Tue-Sun 10-4. Educational presentations are held throughout the day between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m., with a turtle feeding at 10:45 a.m. Suggested donation of \$3 for adults, \$2 for children. Call 956/761-4511; [www.seaturtleinc.org](http://www.seaturtleinc.org).

## GALVESTON NOAA SEA TURTLE FACILITY

On Thursdays by appointment, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Southeast Fisheries Science Center offers tours (limited to visitors age 7 and older) that include a presentation about Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary and the center's research on turtle-friendly fishing gear, as well as a visit to the captive turtle rearing facility, which houses hundreds of turtles. Anytime you find a turtle onshore or catch one while fishing, call 866-TURTLE-5. Hooked sea turtles may have hooks inside their bodies, which the hospital can remove.

Historic Fort Crockett,  
4700 Avenue U, Galveston.  
Tours by appointment. Free.  
Call 409/766-3500;  
[www.galvestonlab.sefsc.noaa.gov/seaturtles/index.html](http://www.galvestonlab.sefsc.noaa.gov/seaturtles/index.html).

## TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY AT GALVESTON SEA LIFE FACILITY

Stranded sea turtles come to this research laboratory and rehabilitation facility to grow stronger prior to release. In the outreach center, watch the turtles in their tanks through large windows and via live-streaming cameras. A sea turtle skeleton hangs from the ceiling, and a display contains debris that harmed specific animals in the facility. The bookstore sells T-shirts bearing images of marine life, including sea turtles, with the proceeds helping fund turtle food. The public is invited when a recovered sea turtle is released onshore.

200 Seawolf Parkway,  
Pelican Island. Opens Mon-Sat  
9-4, and Sun 10-2. Free.  
Call 409/740-4574; [www.tamug.edu/sealife/Index.html](http://www.tamug.edu/sealife/Index.html).

## TEXAS SEA LIFE CENTER

This facility adjacent to Packery Channel Nature Park on North Padre Island rehabilitates and releases injured and stranded sea turtles. Visitors can see recuperating Kemp's ridley, green, loggerhead, and hawksbills swimming in tanks behind the building; educational displays inside; and other rescued animals including raptors and reptiles.

14220 South Padre Island Dr.,  
Corpus Christi. Opens Wed-Sat  
10-4, Sun 12-4. Free, \$5 donation  
suggested. Call 361/589-4023;  
[www.texassealifecenter.org](http://www.texassealifecenter.org).

## SEA LIFE GRAPEVINE AQUARIUM

Home to sharks, rays, many species of reef fish, seahorses, and other marine species, this aquarium also houses three sea turtles unable to return to the wild: greens Boomer and Eddie and Squirt, a Kemp's ridley. Visitors can learn more about them at daily education talks and feeding times.

3000 Grapevine Mills Parkway,  
Grapevine. Hours of admission are  
Mon-Fri 10-6:30, Sat 10-7:30, Sun  
11-5:30 (the aquarium closes 90 minutes  
after the last admission). Adults  
\$20, children \$16. Call 877/819-7677;  
[www.visitsealife.com/grapevine](http://www.visitsealife.com/grapevine).

## TEXAS STATE AQUARIUM

Six resident sea turtles here include a Kemp's ridley, a hawksbill, a loggerhead, and three greens. Observe the turtles through windows in their circular habitat and learn more about them at the daily "Turtle Tales" program (check website for times). Aquarium staff members work with federal officials to decide when turtles can return to the sea, with releases handled by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other agencies. Typically, releases occur far offshore.

2710 N. Shoreline Blvd,  
Corpus Christi. Opens daily 9-6  
March through Labor Day, and  
9-5 daily the rest of the year.  
Check website for admission  
prices. Call 800/477-GULF,  
[www.texasstateaquarium.org](http://www.texasstateaquarium.org).



LOGGERHEAD SEA TURTLE