

Matagorda Island Turtle Patrol May 7-10, 2007

By Bill Farnsworth, Certified Texas Master Naturalist

After an early rising and driving to Aransas National Wildlife Refuge for a 7AM boat departure, the team of Sandra Gay, Kris Kirkwood, Donna McKinney, and Bill Farnsworth set off on a 4-day turtle patrol on Matagorda Island. Upon arrival at the Island, the team stowed their supplies and promptly initiated beach-side search for evidence of turtle nests – particularly Kemp's ridley turtles.

The beach was in terrible condition – Sargassum heavy all along the beach and piled a couple of feet high at some points. Beach erosion prevented early access to the north end due to high tides, but by afternoon the team of Sandra Gay and Bill Farnsworth managed to reach about 22 miles north of the entrance road. Deeming it time to return, that team started back. Slightly before 4 pm and after driving some 30+ miles, the team noted turtle tracks and identified a nest site. The track included an apparently abandoned nest hole, and a possible nest exploration site along the tracks.



It was too late in the day to arrange for nest excavation, so the decision was made to guard the nest site overnight. Sandra volunteered to do so. Using directions from Adolfo, our guardian angel on the island, Sandra and Bill made a quick trip back to headquarters on an untraveled access road over a cliff and through marshes to the center island "highway," while Kris and Donna guarded the nest site. Sandra returned with supplies in a Refuge truck and plowed her way back through the marsh and over the cliff, in just enough time for Kris and Donna to rush down the beach, over the cliff, and across the marsh just before darkness hit.

Sandra enjoyed her night alone on the beach. No predators appeared except for the mosquitoes that came out in force when the wind died down in the early morning. Much of the next day was spent in exploring options for a smoother way off the island in order to protect the turtle eggs. Eventually 98 eggs were extracted and transported to the Matagorda Island boat dock for their subsequent trip to the Padre Island National Seashore incubation facility.



The next day, “Eagle-Eye” Donna spotted a faint trail. Although some of us doubted, we sought a professional opinion, and Chad Stinson arrived for nest exploration. He found the nest, right where Donna suspected it was. Never again will we doubt her eye for tracks!

Inspection showed a fair amount of calcification of the eggs, indicating that the nesting might have occurred as much as two days before we found it. Because of the danger of moving older eggs and the roughness of the beach, and because the nest was in a fairly elevated location, the decision was made to leave the nest on the beach. Chad Stinson and Katherine Cullen erected two barrier fences, one inside the other, to deter predators—feral hogs, coyotes, raccoons and others. Flags were installed to discourage birds from leaving feeding litter that might attract predators.

Later this summer, we may be able to document the first natural hatchlings to return to the sea from Matagorda Island. Sandra, Kris, Donna, and Bill hope to be there to do it.