

## **Matagorda Island Turtle Patrol Finds a Live Turtle & Nest**

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It's finally happened!! Wednesday morning April 26, 2006, about 11 a m, I made the call to the ANWR radio operator...."Aransas Base...Turtle Patrol...WE HAVE A TURTLE ON THE BEACH!"

That's right, Mike Burnett and I were privileged to find and document the first sighting of a nesting Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle on Matagorda Island. What a great experience!! If you'd like to hear more than you probably want, read on...

We were heading north just over 17 miles from the patrol entrance road. Mike spotted her first, less than 100 feet away and directly ahead of the truck. She had apparently finished nesting (We hoped it wasn't a false crawl) and was headed toward the Gulf about 40 feet away. The first order of business was to prevent her from reaching the water. That wasn't an easy task—she was very strong. Once she was under control, we made our call for assistance. Chad Stinson, ANWR Biologist, was immediately on his way.

Now it was time to locate and mark the nest area. Let me assure you that with current beach conditions it was not easy. Even knowing tracks were close, I could not see them. I held onto the turtle while Mike sought out and followed the tracks to the possible nesting site. He marked it with a plastic bottle and returned to relieve me. The suspected nesting site was on the side of the first dune some 100 feet or more from the water.

After taking pictures, we set about searching for tags. We found no pit, metal or living tag, but she did have a tag scar on her right front flipper. We measured her both with calipers and soft tape and then set about "tagging" her. The pit tag was first, followed by a metal tag. I felt like a paramedic, but I almost cried when the entry point began to bleed. Mike assured me that she wasn't going to die as we applied antibiotic ointment. He attached the metal tag with professional ease. We scanned the area with the pit tag reader after inserting the pit tag to be sure it was working and carefully recorded both tag numbers.



Finally, we took a tissue sample and our work was complete. Our training from Dr. Donna Shaver made it easy for us to collect all the data and attach the tags.

EXCEPT that Chad wanted her restrained until he arrived! Boy, it's not easy to hold a Kemp's who is determined to reach water. Thank goodness for Mike's strength. We took turns at holding her firmly while applying as little pressure as possible to her shell. Finally Chad arrived. After more pictures, we released her and within three minutes she was into the water and gone.



Now Chad's task was to locate the nest and retrieve the eggs. I am amazed that a sea creature with so little capability on land can crawl 100 feet from the water, dig a hole, lay eggs, and cover the area so completely that it takes a determined search to locate the nest. In fact the nest was about three feet from Mike's marker. It yielded 96 eggs. Mike and I felt like grandparents.



Finding a turtle is a matter of lucky timing, but finding a nest takes lots of work. Had we arrived three minutes later, she would have been gone and we would have been very unlikely to see the tracks. Last year we were lucky to have beach conditions that made seeing tracks a breeze. Not this year! The secret is eyes on the beach. The more the better.

"Our" turtle was part of the largest nesting day on the Texas coast since the recovery program began. Padre Island National Seashore had

nine nest retrievals the same day and the season is still young. Let's hope this success rate continues!