

Turtle Patrol Heaven

by Andy Smith, June 9, 2007

Photos by Sandra Gay

“Andy, drop that turtle and come get this other one before she gets to the water!” Donna McKinney shouted hysterically as she held the mic preparing to call Chad to ask what to do with the juvenile Green turtle we had just found stranded in the Sargassum. I looked up, expecting to see another stranded Green, and had to blink a couple of times to believe my eyes. There, crawling determinedly toward the surf was an adult Kemp's, obviously just off her nest. I quickly placed the little Green in a corral of seaweed and ran to intercept the Kemp's while Donna composed herself to complete the call to Aransas Base, now with more news for Chad Stinson, our favorite U.S. Fish & Wildlife biologist.

Donna and I had just resumed patrolling after checking the nest at Mile 15 when we saw the tracks of the juvenile Green at about Mile 15.2. We were near the water, on the smooth, damp sand of the forebeach when we spotted the Green's tracks, which looked like they were made by a child's toy bulldozer and not at all like an adult Kemp's. The flipper marks were very closely spaced, and the width and appearance of the tracks was about like the tread of a wide truck tire.

But back to that Kemp's we were struggling to restrain...

After completing her call, Donna began marking the tracks and nest site as I continued to discourage mama from her trip back to sea. About the time Donna finished her task, Kris Kirkwood and Sandra Gay arrived to help. We had met them at Mile 14, less than an hour earlier, and stopped together for lunch and to compare notes. We had come up from the south; they were headed back from the north and, as luck would have it, had driven right by this site probably no more than 15 minutes before our female had crawled up from the surf. If we had all slept a little later that morning, Sandra and Kris would be telling this story!

With everyone helping, we examined our turtle for tags but found none. We tagged her with a metal tag, injected the PIT tag, took a tissue sample, measured turtle and tracks, and then broke out the fencing to build her a corral and wait for Chad. The corral works well, although the turtle must still be monitored closely to ensure she doesn't get a flipper or beak caught or damaged on the wire. We recommend that we carry a small tarp or old sheet in each Kubota to make a shade over the corral. I found an old, triangular channel day-mark of half-inch plywood that we placed over the top of the corral, and the turtle was not only cooler; she seemed to calm somewhat and not work as hard to get out. We also kept a wet towel on her back and frequently poured seawater over her. (Another note: carry a towel in each Kubota.)





Chad finally arrived and gave the okay to release the turtle. I'm almost positive she looked briefly back and muttered something unprintable from the surf when she finally reached it. Has anyone else observed that behavior?

With his usual consummate skill, Chad probed to find the neck of the nest cavity and soon had the location marked. We got the cooler situated and he began clearing out the sand to extract the eggs. Donna marked down the count with each announcement,

"Egg" from Chad, while I held the cover to shade the slowly filling cooler, a task for which I am now certified. Sandra and I had found two nests earlier in the week, each with 112 eggs, and it wouldn't have surprised me if this one contained the same number—some kind of weird anomaly in the law of averages for Matagorda Island—but there turned out to be 104 in this nest. One of the eggs was the size of a marble instead of a ping-pong ball. I told Chad that one would probably hatch to be a red-eared slider, and he thanked me for sharing my biological acumen.

Now, you might think when we loaded Chad and Jeff the Fire-Team Guy who came to assist, along with the egg box and the juvenile green in the Kubota and I began driving this menagerie the six miles back to the access at Mile 21 where they left their truck on Middle Road, that this pretty much ends the story. But you would be wrong.

Not five minutes after heading up the beach, I saw more juvenile turtle tracks. I pointed them out to Chad, stopped the ATV, and we began searching along the tracks. In a minute I held a Green turtle and a minute later Chad had another. And somewhere in there we found a dead juvenile Green. In fact I'm not sure I'm remembering correctly *all* the turtles we found. I think we ended up with three live Greens in milk crates when we made it back to the truck. You know how it is when you find so many turtles that you lose count, right?



Just as an aside, a long, 2-to-3 foot "levee" of Sargassum ran along the waterline of the beach and the juvenile turtles, though still strong, seemed unable to climb over that to reach the surf. We saw several large sharks in the first gut off the beach and wondered if they were catching turtles. Chad says that even though the turtles appear strong and healthy, that they should be removed because they simply strand repeatedly when placed back in the surf. Either that or they become a shark's dinner, I figured.

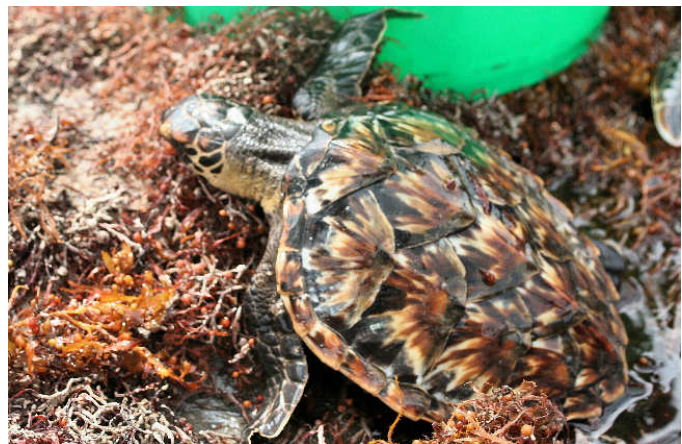
Okay, this time if you think that's the end of the story, you're almost right. We didn't find any more turtles that day. However, Adolfo Cantu, our USFWS caregiver, had asked if we wanted to stay an extra day on the island, and since no authority figure had specifically said we couldn't do that, and since Donna had brought that delicious casserole that was only half gone, and since

Sandra had enough bagged fruit and fancy cookies to feed Coxeys' army, and since Kris wasn't quite out of fresh tomatoes, that's what we did. (I, myself, had a crust of bread and half a boiled egg, but had been practicing my pitiful, hang-dog look, and was confident I wouldn't go hungry.)

The next morning, we made a long run up Middle Road to the Mile 21 access road (now named Flower Road by Sandra Gay) to get quickly to the north end of the island. At about 8:30, Donna and I found another nest—number four for the week! This one was at Mile 22.7 and was very low on the beach, obviously from the previous afternoon, and just above the old Sargassum. In fact because it was so close to the Sargassum and because the tide had been high during the night, there were almost no tracks. I spotted the disturbed sand of the nest only because we were driving very near and just inland of the thick wrack of Sargassum. Most of the old Kubota tracks were considerably farther inland than that, and anyone driving there would have missed this nest. In fact anyone driving where we were who didn't have a turtle angel on his shoulder and who wasn't wearing his lucky shirt or who happened to blink at the wrong moment would have missed this nest. But the real reason we found it was due to the turtle patrol boot camp I endured under the watchful eye of Ray Kirkwood.

"Get closer to the Sargassum, down toward the water," Ray would growl at me as I patrolled with him two weeks before and we were forced high on the beach. Frustrated, I certainly would have turned the wheel of the Kubota over to this turtle-patrol gunnery sergeant, except for the fact that he had one arm in a sling and there was no way he could drive and hold on at the same time. So I drove the whole week, thinking often of the movie, "Driving Miss Daisy" and bemoaning my fate. But like Marine Corps recruits, by the end of the training, I was ready. And like them, I grew to respect and appreciate my drill instructor. Thank you, Ray. I hope we patrol together again soon.

After marking the nest, Donna and I continued patrolling while awaiting Chad. Back at Mile 16, we came upon more juvenile turtle tracks. This time I followed them to a 10-inch long Hawksbill in the Sargassum. She seemed in good shape and had a beautifully colored carapace. Donna soon found another juvenile Green turtle. And then, as we watched Sandra and Kris approach from the south, we saw them stop on the beach and knew they had come across another.



So when Chad arrived and excavated our nest, in addition to the 107 eggs he took back, there was a Hawksbill and two Greens heading for the ARK rehab facility in Port Aransas. We are very hopeful that all the juvenile turtles survive and are successfully returned to their home in the sea.

Now, you might assume I named this story because of all the luck we had finding nests, encountering the Kemp's, and saving stranded juveniles. Well, maybe. But don't forget I was the only male patroller that week with three gracious ladies who shared their food and never complained about my driving—not as far as I know, anyway. That had something to do with it, too!