

Dear Sea Turtle Friends and Supporters,

The 2009 season gave us quite a wild ride, and a lengthy one to boot. It seems like we just cleaned our final nest and here we are again. The turtles got started earlier than ever – and finished later than ever – which had patrol volunteers hard at work about 8 weeks longer than in a typical season. Indeed, it will be remembered as a year of 'firsts', not just for our area but all around the state. Let's review, shall we?

- First nest: April 16 (leatherback)
- Last nest: September 10 (loggerhead)
- Total nests: 36 (4 leatherback, 32 loggerhead)
- Total eggs (from 35 evaluated nests): 3,801 (2,746 hatched, 1,055 unhatched)
- Disorientations: 2
- Predations: 2
- False Crawls: 22
- Strandings: 24

Thirty of the 36 nests had successful emergences. Five were infertile or not completely developed. One nest suffered water damage from high tides which left the eggs too saturated to be examined. One of the disorientations was caused by a porch light in Atlantic Beach that was left on. All of the hatchlings went due west, became entrapped and were mortally attacked by ant colonies, so it was also labeled as a 'predated' nest.

The first four nests were all leatherbacks, which is historical in itself since we usually see only one or two every few years. Even more importantly, two of them were fertile and hatched successfully! They were the very first documented leatherback hatchlings in Duval County. You can just imagine our excitement! One of these nests was also disoriented, but minor in comparison; only 8 hatchlings were found in the dunes and subsequently released. We have the release on video for you (more on that later).

The other predation incident occurred in South Jax Beach. It was caused by a dog that tunneled into a freshly emerged nest and strew the egg shells around the beach. Had there been any live hatchlings left in the nest (and there may have been, we have no way of knowing for sure), they certainly would have perished.



Another 'first' was the date of the final nest – September 10 – later than any nest we've documented thus far. We didn't expect it to be viable that late in the season but we still had to treat it as though it were. We tended to it lovingly all the way up through November 24, when it was inventoried. As expected,

none of the eggs had fully developed, but we were surprised to note a discernable level of development in many.

The false crawl count was normal, and they were all loggerheads. A false crawl occurs when a nesting female emerges from the ocean but does not make a nest, for a number of reasons (people, lights, noise, or she just doesn't like the sand quality or location). False crawls can include any range of nesting behaviors short of the actual laying of the clutch. Sometimes she'll do some crawling and digging, other times she'll simply make a U-ie and return to the sea. The stranding count was also about average for the calendar year and there were no out-of-the-ordinary events here.

Statewide Report

Turtle conservation groups across the state experienced their own 'firsts' in 2009. By far, the largest event was the influx of cold-stunned turtles. Cold-stunning is the state that turtles enter when they are suddenly exposed to very cold water (< 10 °C).

They become lethargic and begin to float on the surface of the water. In this state, they are susceptible to predators, accidental boat strikes, and even death if water temperatures continue to drop. Fortunately for us in north Florida, the majority of these turtles were found in Brevard County. The preliminary estimates as of January were that 4,592 cold-stunned turtles were rescued, with 948 fatalities. Virtually all were green turtles. More than 100 volunteer rescue groups were involved with this massive effort in conjunction with Florida Fish and Wildlife (FWC).



Turtles getting warmed up (FWC)

The preliminary statewide nesting results continue to show a declining trend for loggerheads (40% since 1989). However, the numbers for greens and leatherbacks show an increase (6-fold and 11-fold, respectively) since 1989. Excluding the cold-stun event, stranding counts for the year show a flattening trend for loggerheads (692), an increase for greens (672, the highest ever), and a decrease for leatherbacks (9). We can't rejoice for the loggerheads flattening trend because it is most certainly a reflection of their declining population. Help may be on the way, though. On March 10, 2010, the Obama administration recommended raising the classification of loggerheads from 'threatened' to 'endangered', based on a joint proposal from NOAA and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. A link to more information is posted on our Facebook fan page.

Other Current Issues

Conservation groups around the state are working on a variety of possible legislative or regulatory issues that further impact sea turtles or their habitats. Of major concern is a new direction in coastal management policy resulting in an unprecedented scale of engineering our coastline. Examples:

- Singer Island breakwater project
- Geotextile tubes
- Oil exploration and drilling

We are not aware of any pending projects for breakwaters or geotubes in our area, but the oil issue could potentially have a huge impact so we are supporting protests against it. As you may know, the state of Florida is considering revoking the ban against drilling in our waters. Currently, the ban extends 10.4 miles into the gulf and three miles into the Atlantic. Why should we be concerned? It's essentially about long term habitat protection and the ecological functions those habitats provide. On February 13th, BSTP volunteers and other concerned citizens participated in a protest called 'Hands Across The Sand', wherein people around the state simultaneously joined hands to form lines in the sand as a sign of opposition to opening up our waters. Over 60 people from all walks of life joined us in Jax Beach. Our website and Facebook page have many links to additional information and resources to contact state officials. We respect that others may have a different viewpoint for their own reasons, but our perspective is for the welfare of the turtles and other marine life.



Photo credit: Shelli Martin

Did you renew your turtle plate this year ???

As the name implies, the Sea Turtle Grants Program awards grants for research activities involving sea turtles to qualifying conservation groups. These funds come from sales of the sea turtle specialty tag. Since 2001 they have awarded over \$2.4 million for 182 projects. In September 2009 vehicle registration renewal fees increased by more than 60%. New sales and renewals of specialty tags decreased by about 70%. Still, the sea turtle tag is the second best-selling specialty plate, so thank you to all who have one. The sales are especially important now because the cold-stunning event is estimated to deplete \$20k of the funds.

Turtle tag sales are not isolated in experiencing a fiscal decline. BSTP's 2009 membership and nest adoption donations were about 15% lower than 2008, and the lowest since at least 2005. With the increased cost of gasoline, the longer season, combined with over \$2,000 for ATV towing and repairs, plus our

regular expenses, our funds have shrunk dramatically. There are two entities who hold annual benefits for BSTP that we would like to acknowledge since their support has been pivotal in helping us stay afloat year after year. The Beaches A1A Parrot Head Club holds a polar plunge in memory of former BSTP member Earlene Holton, and First Street Gallery has hosted a sea turtle art show for many years. They each donate a portion of their proceeds to our cause. Thank you, Parrot Heads, and special thanks to JoAnne, Denise and all the other artists from First Street Gallery. The 2010 show will be held 5/26 – 7/6. Join us for the opening reception on 5/28.

Did you know

that sea turtles have a long (30 year) rate of reproductive maturity? This year's nesting turtles were born when Jimmy Carter was president !

Each year, BSTP strives to provide our supporters with something new that we hope will add value to your experience. In 2009, we produced laminated turtle track cards and children's activity booklets for educational giveaways. We also implemented an enhancement to the nest adoption program which people seem to like: we now email a certificate with the hatching results of your adopted nest. We also created a presence on Facebook as a way to share more of the nesting experience with you, within the confines of FWC directives. Facebook will be our primary method of sharing photos and videos (such as the leatherback hatchling release mentioned earlier), plus links to turtle-related information we think will be of interest. You don't have to belong to Facebook to view the postings, but if you do, please join as a fan and suggest the page to your friends. The more people who are aware of issues affecting sea turtles, the more help they can receive. Page fans can also post their own links and photos. Our fan page is located at <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Beaches-Sea-Turtle-Patrol/173520318765> and you can also reach it through the direct link on our regular website.

One of the things we're excited about implementing this year is an online donation option via PayPal, the most popular provider of secure, online payment services. It's not only convenient for you, it's green, too! No printing out the membership form, writing a check or using an envelope. A PayPal account is not required – you can use your credit card. Since this is a new process for us, please be patient as we work out any wrinkles. See our website for more details and donation links.

We hope to see you at our season kick-off meeting on April 12th, 6:30 pm at the Beaches Library. We'll have much more to share with you then. Thank you for your continued support, and remember – extinction really is forever.

BSTP Directors