

Brevard Zoo caring for hurricane-stranded baby turtles

(Photo: Craig Rubadoux / FLORIDA TODAY)

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VIERA — The Brevard Zoo Sea Turtle Healing Center is rehabilitating a record-breaking number of miniature “washback” baby turtles left stranded and helpless by Hurricane Nicole’s waves and wind.

Sunday afternoon, 74 tiny sea turtles rescued from Space Coast beaches were feasting on fingernail-sized shrimp bits and recuperating inside tanks and pools at the specialized zoo facility, which opened in April 2014.

Nearly all were loggerheads, with a handful of green turtles mixed in. These pint-sized reptiles lived amid the sargassum seaweed ecosystem 30 to 35 miles off the Brevard County coast — until Hurricane Nicole shoved them ashore.

“These turtles are probably anywhere from 1 month to 2 months old. And their one job as a tiny turtle is just to eat and grow. Eat anything they can eat. And they’re eating these things instead of food, so their bodies are weak,” said Melanie Stadler, sea turtle program coordinator, displaying tiny bits of plastic in her palm.





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“When we get strong storm events, we’ll see turtles that are weakened wash back to the beach,” she said.

Stadler said Hurricane Matthew’s south-to-north march skimming the Space Coast did not affect these turtles. However, since Monday or Tuesday of last week, washbacks have continued piling up daily. =

“Once Matthew got by and all the rip currents and everything were gone, Hurricane Nicole’s just sitting out there offshore. And she’s just pushing that water back this way,” she said.

For comparison’s sake, the Sea Turtle Healing Center cared for about 15 green turtle washbacks and a dozen or fewer loggerhead washbacks during all of 2015, Stadler said.

Sea Turtle Preservation Society volunteers remained on alert Sunday, watching for more stranded hatchlings. The National Weather Service issued a coastal flood advisory and rip-current warning Sunday, warning of onshore winds, 4- to 5-foot waves and additional beach erosion.



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“Right now, the whole East Coast is inundated with washbacks. The Volusia Marine Science Center has 400 or 500 of them. They have a ton,” Stadler said.

Shortly before noon Sunday at the zoo, STPS volunteer Bert Alm dropped off a dozen washbacks — 11 loggerhead and one green — from a black plastic tub in his Honda Odyssey.

Alm said these turtles were picked up from beaches between DoubleTree Suites by Hilton Hotel Melbourne Beach Oceanfront and the Barrier Island Center vicinity.

Within the hour, STPS volunteer Marilyn Seal dropped off two more washbacks while transporting an ailing, emaciated 108-pound loggerhead turtle that was covered with barnacles. Tourists spotted the lethargic adult and rescued it just north of SPRA Park in South Patrick Shores, Seal said.

Gretchen Arndt, a senior marine biology major at Eastern Florida State College, stood in a knee-deep water tank hand-feeding tiny pieces of shrimp to dozens of washbacks. Some turtles nibbled her legs.

“I had one try to eat my ring earlier,” Arndt said, laughing.

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Sea turtle hotline

To report a stranded sea turtle, call the Sea Turtle Preservation Society emergency line at 321-206-0646.

