

Leatherback Tracks Excite Sebastian Personnel

June 25, 1989|By Tom Haynes of the Sentinel Staff

3-4 minutes

The largest leatherback turtle documented at Sebastian Inlet State Park crawled up on the south beach to lay her eggs recently during the cover of darkness.

Capt. Ron Johns, park manager, said the turtle measured 7-foot, 1-inch. Measurements were taken from flipper to flipper, which is determined by the crawl marks left in the sand.

This is the second leatherback crawl documented this year and only the third over the past 10 years according to statistical data maintained by park personnel.

Hutchinson Island, just south of Fort Pierce, is the number one nesting area for leatherbacks, which makes this crawl unique and exciting. Johns said, "We are all so excited about this leatherback, it's almost like having a baby."

The leathery type shell is where the leatherback turtle gets its name. Their front flippers are large and powerful, designed for ocean travel. Leatherbacks have been known to travel up to 3,000 miles. The plastron (belly) is vulnerable to cuts as the turtle crosses shoals and reefs, and they bleed easily.

The leatherback is the heaviest of all turtle species and they typically leave a unique crawl mark, an "S" pattern, in the sand, making identification easy.

Loggerhead turtles alternate onestep at a time and green turtles lunge both flippers forward at the same time.

Fifty percent of the sighted leatherback crawls don't end in nesting, according to Terry O'Toole, park ranger and turtle walk guide at Sebastian. The mother turtle decides either it's not the right place or time.

Leatherbacks can nest 10 days to two weeks apart in one season and usually nest in different locations. She lays 60 to 100 eggs per nest and the eggs take about 60 to 70 days to hatch. Eggs are a little larger than other turtle species, but are more infertile. Once eggs are laid, nature takes over. The temperature of the nest during incubation determines the sex of the turtle.

Loggerhead nesting habits are different. They will nest up to nine times a year, laying about 115 eggs per nest, and won't nest again for about two years.

This is the 10th year the state Department of Natural Resources, Parks Department, has been providing educational turtle walks for the public at Sebastian Inlet.

Turtle walks are conducted June through July and there is no charge, however, reservations are required. Tours are limited to 15 people. The tour starts at 9 p.m. at the McLarty Museum at Sebastian Inlet State Park where visitors are shown a slide presentation about sea turtles.

Visitors should be prepared to walk up to three miles along the beach. Wear comfortable shoes and bring some insect repellent.

Last season, tours were 85 percent successful at locating nesting loggerhead turtles.

O'Toole recommends individuals do not go out on their own turtle hunts. There are several organizations that provide interpretive turtle tours such as Canaveral National Seashore, Sea Turtle Preservation Society, Florida Power and Light and the state Department of Natural Resources, Parks Department.

Reservations can be made for turtle walks at Sebastian Inlet by calling 984-4852. Don't wait until the last minute, tours are filling up quickly.