

Rare Sight -- Sea Turtle Lays Eggs In Daylight

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3-4 minutes

MELBOURNE BEACH — In a rare daytime appearance, an endangered leatherback sea turtle dug a nest and laid eggs on the beach Thursday morning in south Brevard County.

"Even at night it would be rare to see a leatherback nesting, but during the day it's unheard of," said Charles McCarthy, a conservationist with the state Sea Turtle Preservation Society. "I was shocked and then very excited when I saw it was a leatherback.

"She was beautiful, absolutely beautiful."

Biologist Ross Witham, the marine turtle coordinator for the state Department of Natural Resources, said he has heard scattered reports of sea turtles nesting during the day, but seeing a leatherback nesting in sunlight is "quite unusual."

Only about 50,000 leatherbacks remain in the world, he said. Although most leatherbacks nest in Central and South America, a small number nest each year in Florida.

Peter Bandre, director of the preservation society, said federal permits are required to move a leatherback nest, so the nest will not be touched unless it is threatened with being washed away by the ocean.

"The fines for harassing a leatherback are very strict -- up to 10 years in jail and a \$10,000 fine," he said. "Disturbing a nest carries a \$10,000 fine per egg. The federal government is serious about protecting leatherbacks."

The turtle was seen crawling up the beach about 9:30 a.m. behind the Sandy Shoes Motel on State Road A1A three miles south of Melbourne Beach. Art Christmann and Chad Bresson, the manager and assistant manager of the motel, notified the preservation society.

"This is the first time I ever saw a live sea turtle," Bresson said. "I've heard stories about people going out at night to watch for them, but I never dreamed I'd see one during the day.

"The turtle seemed pretty confused. It dug one hole in the sand, then I guess it wasn't satisfied with it because it came up the beach a little way and dug another hole. It took until about 11:45 a.m. for the turtle to finish laying the eggs and go back in the water."

McCarthy said the sea turtle's shell was 58 inches long and 40 inches wide, and its head was about the size of a human's. A "conservative estimate" on the turtle's weight is about 450 pounds, he said.

"It was very dark gray with slightly lighter gray spots, and it had light pink under the flippers," he said. "Its shell was very smooth between the ridges -- since leatherbacks move quickly through the water, they don't accumulate barnacles on their shells like other turtles."

Bandre said leatherbacks usually lay between 60 and 100 tennis ball-sized eggs per nest. Each turtle usually nests about five times during nesting season, waiting 10 days between each nest.

"That means she'll probably nest here again," Bandre said. "We found another leatherback nest 10 days ago just south of this one, so we're pretty sure this is her second nest, especially since we don't get many leatherbacks here."

Of the approximately 10,000 sea turtle nests found last year on the 12-mile stretch of beach between Melbourne Beach and Sebastian Inlet, only four were leatherback nests, state figures show. That section of beach is the primary nesting site in the Western Hemisphere for loggerhead sea turtles.