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Sea Turtle Season Returns to Florida!

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As Florida's Sea Turtle nesting season begins, find out where you can join a Turtle Walk! To personally observe a nesting loggerhead sea turtle is an amazing, authentic and not to be missed Florida experience.

Mother sea turtle preparing her nest, *courtesy of Edward Perry*

Mother Sea Turtle returning to the ocean after nesting, *courtesy of Edward Perry*

The following is a recap of one of our Authentic Florida Turtle Walk experiences:

It was a pitch dark, warm evening as a small crowd gathered at the beach, the designated meeting point for our Authentic Florida adventure. A Sea Turtle Preservation Society volunteer cheerfully greeted and gave us an idea of what to expect for the evening.

We were about to experience one of the most magical wonders of Florida – a giant loggerhead sea turtle laying her eggs on the beach.

Before the walk, we heard a presentation on sea turtles as volunteer “advance” scouts spotted one emerging onto the beach to dig her nest.

We were then instructed to walk quietly, single file, along the water’s edge following the lead volunteer while being reminded that flashlights or flash photography were strictly prohibited. Infrared lights were used to lead us and to illuminate the hole in which the mama turtle was dutifully laying her eggs. She sat in a trance-like state oblivious to all around her.

Mother turtles transition into a trance-like state when laying eggs, *courtesy of Edward Perry*

Prior to our arrival, she had trekked from the water’s edge across the beach towards the sand dunes, fastidiously scooping out a deep cavity with her flippers. Situating her 200-350 pound body over the pit, she slowly began to drop her eggs.

For almost an hour we watched in amazement while the mother turtle dropped around 100 ping-pong sized leathery eggs into the cylindrical sandy hole. Following her egg deposit, she then carefully covered her nest with the sand, and upon regaining her energy, slowly crawled back to the water's edge and into the ocean, disappearing into the darkness of the vast ocean.

Mother sea turtle returning to the ocean, *courtesy of Edward Perry*

From May through October, while we're fast asleep, these magical moments are quietly occurring along Florida's coastline. Overnight, our beaches and barrier islands become North America's #1 sea turtle nesting grounds. Mother loggerhead, green and leatherback turtles lumber onto Florida beaches depositing eggs into sandy, camouflaged nests.

Sea turtles nest along Florida's coastal beaches

There are three primary species of nesting turtles found along Florida's coasts. The **loggerhead sea turtle**, the most predominant species, derives its name from its extra large head, weighing between 200-350 pounds and measuring three to four feet in length. The endangered **green turtle** is rounded and distinctive with a smaller head. Its name is derived from the greenish fat in its upper and lower shell. The third species, the **leatherback turtle**, gets its name from its tough, leathery skin, and weighs in between 500-1300 pounds. Both the green and leatherback turtles are less common than the loggerhead, which averages four to seven nests per year.

Sea turtle exhibit, Barrier Island Refuge, Melbourne Beach

To protect these endangered species and their nesting grounds, in some parts of Florida the turtle patrol volunteer rises before dawn to monitor long stretches of beach for signs of activity. Individuals search for fresh tracks, resembling small tractor treads, that signal the formation of a new nest. From the water's edge, the tracks lead to higher ground and softer sand. Sometimes, the flipper tracks will create a semi-circle from the water up the beach and back to the water, called a "false crawl" which indicates the turtle has decided to return to the water. This usually means the turtle has been disturbed or did not find a suitable nesting site.

Volunteers often measure the distance from the water to the nest and sketch a diagram of the turtle's path. Next, the turtle patrol carefully digs into the sand looking for the eggs, found in a chamber below the surface. Once documented, the hole is filled and the nest is staked with neon-colored tape and an explanatory sign warning against disturbance. The tireless dedication of the turtle patrol not only protects the nests, but also provides important data for scientists to study and monitor sea turtle activity.

Sea turtle eggs (dug by a volunteer to ensure a nest is present)

Incubation lasts approximately sixty days and as the nursery “due date” inches closer (can vary 4-5 days) a depression forms in the sand that indicates hatchling movements. Soon, the babies begin digging out “en masse” to start their journey to the water’s edge. The reflection of the moonlight on the water inspires their pathway to the sea. Once in the water, they will face marine predators, however, the greatest threat is the human one, through commercial fishing gear, artificial lighting, litter and development.

Sea turtle tracks

Join a Turtle Walk

Volunteer-led beach walks can be daytime or at night, which gives participants the opportunity to see new and fresh nests or see live loggerheads actually nesting, depositing the eggs, covering the nest and returning to the water. On Florida's east coast, they are usually held in the evenings after 8:00 pm. Tours are limited to small groups and preceded by an educational overview and discussion of sea turtles. A few of the programs include "turtle hatchling" evenings where participants can see the newly hatched babies crawl from the nest down to the water's edge.

The majority of organized turtle walks are on Florida's Atlantic coast with 80% found between New Smyrna Beach and Boca Raton. The intense geographical density of the nesting activity creates more opportunities to see a turtle creating a nest. **Most walks are held June through July and all require advance reservations that fill quickly.** Most walks will charge a donation or fee. Also, if you are taking young children, there tend to be age limits.

Many of the organizations that host sea turtle walks are small and volunteer driven, and it is best to call by phone to discuss availability.

If a Florida turtle walk is on your **Authentic Florida Bucket List**, then think about calling ***immediately*** to reserve your space.

Daytime sea turtle walk to look for nests

Usually, the evening tour starts at a nature center or facility where they will show a brief film, while certified volunteer scouts are searching the beaches for nesting loggerheads. The volunteer then radios

the group to join him/her for the nesting turtle beach viewing. That's when the adventure begins ...

A staked sea turtle nest

Locations for Florida Sea Turtle Walks (North - South)

Canaveral National Seashore**, Titusville**

Reservations start May 15th. (386)428.3384, ext. 0, Recommend calling back until you get a live person (no reservations on-line)

Wednesday, Thursday, Friday & Saturday through July, 8pm.

Two locations: North (Apollo Beach); South (Playalinda Beach)

Sea Turtle Preservation Society**, Melbourne/Satellite Beach**

Reservations begin May 1st; (321)676.1701. Sign up online.

Walks will be from May 23rd - July 21st.

Days vary at select locations (Melbourne & Satellite Beach)

Minimum donation: $16 per person; Children must be at least 7 years old.

Barrier Island Sanctuary, **Melbourne Beach**

To make a reservation, go online to the website or for more information call (321)723.3556

Sign-ups are open now.

Walks are Monday through Friday, June 1st - July 31st, 9pm.

Cost is $15 per person, paid in advance, to reserve your space.

NOTE: This is considered the largest and best nesting habitats for Loggerheads in the western hemisphere. Green and Leatherback turtles also nest here.

Sebastian Inlet State Park, **Melbourne Beach**

Reservations are open now. Sign up online. Call (772)388-2750 for more information.

Tours are Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays, Monday & Tuesdays - June & July, 9pm.

$10 donation

Florida Power & Light at the St. Lucie Nuclear Power Plant**, St. Lucie Island**

Reservations are open now; (888)646.6396 (#1)

Listen to the online recording (for available dates), leave name and number in party with your phone number for a call back.

Florida Oceanographic Society, **Stuart**

Monday & Wednesday nights from May 30th - August 1st (Monday & Thursday nights during July 4th week). 9pm (doors open at 8:50pm for sign-in)

Register online only.

For any other questions regarding this program, please call 772-225-0505 ext. 113

$12 per participant (adult or child).

Participants must be at least 8 years of age. Children or teens under 18 must be accompanied by an adult.

Hobe Sound Nature Center**, Hobe Sound Public Beach**

Call or book online for Thursday & Friday walks, for May 25th through July 21st, at 8pm.

For more information, call (772)546.2067.

$5 donation for walk.

Loggerhead Marinelife Center**, Juno Beach**

Reservations are available online or call (561)627.8280 for more information.

June 1st - July 29th, on select days, 9pm.

$17 per person

John D. MacArthur Beach State Park**, North Palm Beach**

Registration begins online on May 30th.

(561)624.6950 for more information

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday walks, 8pm - midnight, June 5th - July 14th.

$12 per person

Gumbo Limbo Nature Center**, Boca Raton**

Online reservations are available now for specific dates in May, June, and July.

For more information, call (561)544.8605

The Nature Center hosts both Turtle Walks and Baby Turtle Hatchling Releases.

Museum of Discovery and Science**, Ft. Lauderdale**

Call to make a reservation (954)713.0930

Tuesday, Wednesday & Thursday walks, June 13th - July 13th, 9pm.

$19 for members; $21 for non-members

Also, check out the turtle displays and a visible live nest with incubating eggs (during summer).

Von Mizell-Eula State Park, (formerly John U. Lloyd Beach State Park), **Dania Beach**

Call for reservations, cannot sign up online. Call John at (954)924.3859

Friday & Wednesday walks, June & July.

Fee is $6 per vehicle; Children should be at least 5 years old.

Westlake Park/Anne Kolb Nature Center, **Hollywood**

This is a (baby turtle) Hatching Release Program where you can view the babies traveling to the ocean.

Registration is online starting on Monday, May 21st. or call for more information (954)357.5161 (#0).

Wednesday & Friday walks, July 6th - September 5th, at 8:30pm; $10 per person

Baby sea turtle hatchling, *courtesy, Edward Perry*

Crandon Park Visitors' and Nature Center**, Key Biscayne**

This is a Sea Turtle Hatchling Release program where you can view the babies travel from the nest to the water.

Reservations begin July 1 for walks in July, August & September. Make reservations online at www.MiamiEcoAdventures.com or call (305)666-5885.

$10 per person

Florida's West Coast Turtle Walk**, Sarasota**

On the Gulf coast, Sarasota's Longboat Key Turtle Watch hosts morning Saturday morning walks the month of July. For information on the dates go to the Longboat Key Turtle Watch Facebook Page. Visitors meet on Longboat Key, stroll to the beach in search of mother sea turtles tracks. On the tour, volunteers search for tracks that lead to freshly laid nests, stake the nests for protection, while you share the wonderment of Florida’s magical beach nursery.

What to Take

Dark clothes, long sleeve shirts, bug repellant and comfortable shoes. No camera equipment allowed. Expect to walk up to ½ - 1 mile in soft sand.

How can you help Florida's sea turtles?

Tips for safeguarding our sea turtles:

· If you happen to come upon a nesting turtle, remain quiet and observe from a distance. Do not shine a flashlight or lamp.

· From May through October, if you are residing on/near the beach, turn off all lights visible from the beach. Pull drapes/blinds in the evening to dim the light cast upon the beach. (Turtles/hatchlings are oriented towards the light of the horizon and can be disoriented by artificial lights.)

· Pull all beach furniture away from the beach. (Turtles can get trapped in the furniture.)

· Fill in obvious beach holes where small hatchlings can fall unable to climb out.

· Pick up all trash from the beach

· Avoid fireworks on the beach (where sea turtles are nesting)

· Do not pick up turtle hatchlings.

· Become a volunteer and help our future sea turtle population!

Funded by a portion of revenues from Florida's Sea Turtle Specialty License Plate, the Sea Turtle Grants Program distributes funds each year to support sea turtle research, conservation and education programs that benefit Florida sea turtles.

Thanks to the efforts of the non-profit Sea Turtle Conservancy and other Florida sea turtle groups, in 1997, the Florida Legislature (Statute 320.08058 (19)) authorized the creation of a Sea Turtle Specialty License Plate to promote the conservation and protection of Florida's sea turtles through providing a permanent funding source for the state's Marine Turtle Protection Program. Learn more about the Sea Turtle License Plate.

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