

Tropical Storm Eta strands dozens of baby sea turtles along Space Coast beaches

Rick Neale

Florida Today

Tropical Storm Eta's squalls are shoving helpless baby sea turtles ashore across the Space Coast — and experts warn beachgoers against putting the tiny reptiles back into the churning sea.

The Sea Turtle Preservation Society transported 30 of these little "washback" turtles to the Brevard Zoo for care on Sunday, said Susan Skinner, STPS board chair.

Monday afternoon, trained volunteers with the Indialantic nonprofit's Sea Turtle Emergency Response Program took an additional 22 washbacks to the zoo, said Shanon Gann, who manages the zoo's Sea Turtle Healing Center.



Eta's winds and waves are pushing floating mats of seaweed from the Sargasso Sea onto beaches across Brevard County. After hatching in sandy nests, young sea turtles swim 20 to 25 miles to reach this offshore "weed line," which provides protective habitat near the Gulf Stream.

"The wind had been blowing that sargassum apart, and these turtles get pushed back in. That natural sargassum that they're out there foraging in — and hiding and thriving in as young, first-year sea turtles — got displaced," Gann said.



Eta spawned a National Weather Service high surf advisory that remains in effect until 7 p.m. Tuesday in Brevard. Meteorologists warn of large, breaking waves 5 to 7 feet high, dangerous rip currents and rough surf.

In tandem, Eta triggered a wind advisory through 7 p.m. Monday. The forecast called for east winds near 25 mph, with gusts reaching 35 to 40 mph.



Beachgoers who find a washback sea turtle on the beach should follow these guidelines:

- Call the STPS emergency hotline at 321-206-0646 or the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission at 888-404-3922 for guidance
- Do not return the hatchling to the ocean, as it likely will not have enough energy to survive
- Do not place the hatchling in water or air conditioning, which could further injure or kill the wee creature

"Remember that sea turtles of all sizes are federally protected, and it is illegal to touch them. Though you may think you're doing a good deed by returning washbacks to the water, these fragile little reptiles will not make it far because they lack the energy to make the miles-long return to the Sargassum line," zoo officials wrote in a Monday blog post.

"Stay off the beach during extreme weather and wave action, and heed all posted regulations. We appreciate your assistance in protecting these treasured creatures, but your own safety should always come first," the post said.

Only one in 1,000 to one in 10,000 hatchlings survive to adulthood, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration estimates. Many are eaten by beach-based and aquatic predators such as seabirds, crabs, raccoons and fish.



More: [Sea turtle named for NASA-SpaceX astronauts returns to ocean in Satellite Beach](#)

More: [Sea turtle nests ruined by Tropical Storm Isaias -- but don't touch hatchlings or eggs](#)

Eta is primarily stranding young green sea turtles and "very small" loggerhead sea turtles in Brevard, Gann said.

"They're all going to get nutritional support. They'll be given medical attention. And we're going to go ahead and give them some fluid therapy, because a lot of them are probably dehydrated," Gann said.

The pint-sized turtles will eventually be transported via boat back to the Sargasso Sea. Gann said one of the Eta washbacks in the zoo's care, a green turtle, is missing an eye.

"This turtle also had little nibbles out of his rear flippers and off of his carapace. They're all healed wounds — but we were discussing how hard it is. These guys have a lot of obstacles to overcome in just their first few months of life," Gann said.

"This whole situation with them being washed back? This is not part of their plan. This disrupts their fitness. It disrupts their entire survival, because they're not designed for this," she said.

"When they are pushed back like this, they lose their food source. They are tired. And a lot of them perish — we only see a fraction of them. We don't even know the ones that don't make it back to the sand," she said.

Southeasterly gusts reaching 25 mph remain in the forecast through Thursday, as Eta continues churning in the Gulf of Mexico.



*Rick Neale is the South Brevard Watchdog Reporter at FLORIDA TODAY. Contact Neale at 321-242-3638 or rneale@floridatoday.com.
Twitter: [@RickNeale1](https://twitter.com/RickNeale1). To
subscribe: <https://cm.floridatoday.com/specialoffer/>*