

2001 MARINE TURTLE NESTING SUMMARY

CANAVERAL NATIONAL SEASHORE



Heather Hollis , Jessica McGettigan, and John Stiner

December 2001

2001 MARINE TURTLE NESTING SUMMARY CANAVERAL NATIONAL SEASHORE

INTRODUCTION

Canaveral National Seashore is an important nesting area for several species of threatened and endangered sea turtles. These are primarily the loggerhead (Carretta caretta), with a lesser number of green (Chelonia mydas) and an occasional leatherback (Dermochelys coriacea). Nest depredation, primarily by raccoons, is a serious threat, with depredation rates exceeding 90 percent in the early 1980's (McMurtry 1986). In 1984, the park implemented a nest screening program to protect nests while allowing the raccoon to remain as an integral part of the seashore ecosystem. In 1993 and 1994, the University of Georgia compared three methods of nest protection, screening, predator removal and conditioned-taste-aversion (Ratnaswamy 1995; Warren 1996). They found screening to be most effective and compatible with National Park Service guidelines and objectives.

2001 was the eighteenth year for Canaveral National Seashore's sea turtle nest protection program. Since 1995, park staff has managed to screen over 90 percent of the several thousand nests deposited each year, reducing nest depredation to as low as 19.85 percent in 2001. The park's goal is to achieve the 60 percent hatching rate targeted in the loggerhead and green sea turtle recovery plans (NMFS and USFWS 1991) without removing predators from their important role in the barrier island ecosystem.

STUDY SITES AND METHODS

Canaveral National Seashore is located along the east-central coast of Florida with Bethune Beach to the north and Kennedy Space Center to the south (Figure 1). The northern 18.1 kilometers (11.25 miles) of beach is situated in Volusia County and the southern 20.2 kilometers (12.5 miles) in Brevard County.

The beach is essentially undeveloped with only a few artificial lights and a number of boardwalks to protect the dune vegetation. The dune is well developed along most of the beach and is stabilized by a thick growth of sea oats (*Uniola paniculata*), sea grape (*Coccoloba uvifera*), saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens*) and other dune species. The beach was divided into 94 quarter-mile long grids by placing numbered four by four posts along the dune line. These grids provide a reference point for documenting nest locations.

The beach is closed to the public between sunset and sunrise except for occasional guided turtle walks. These walks are limited in size to minimize disturbance to the nesting turtles.

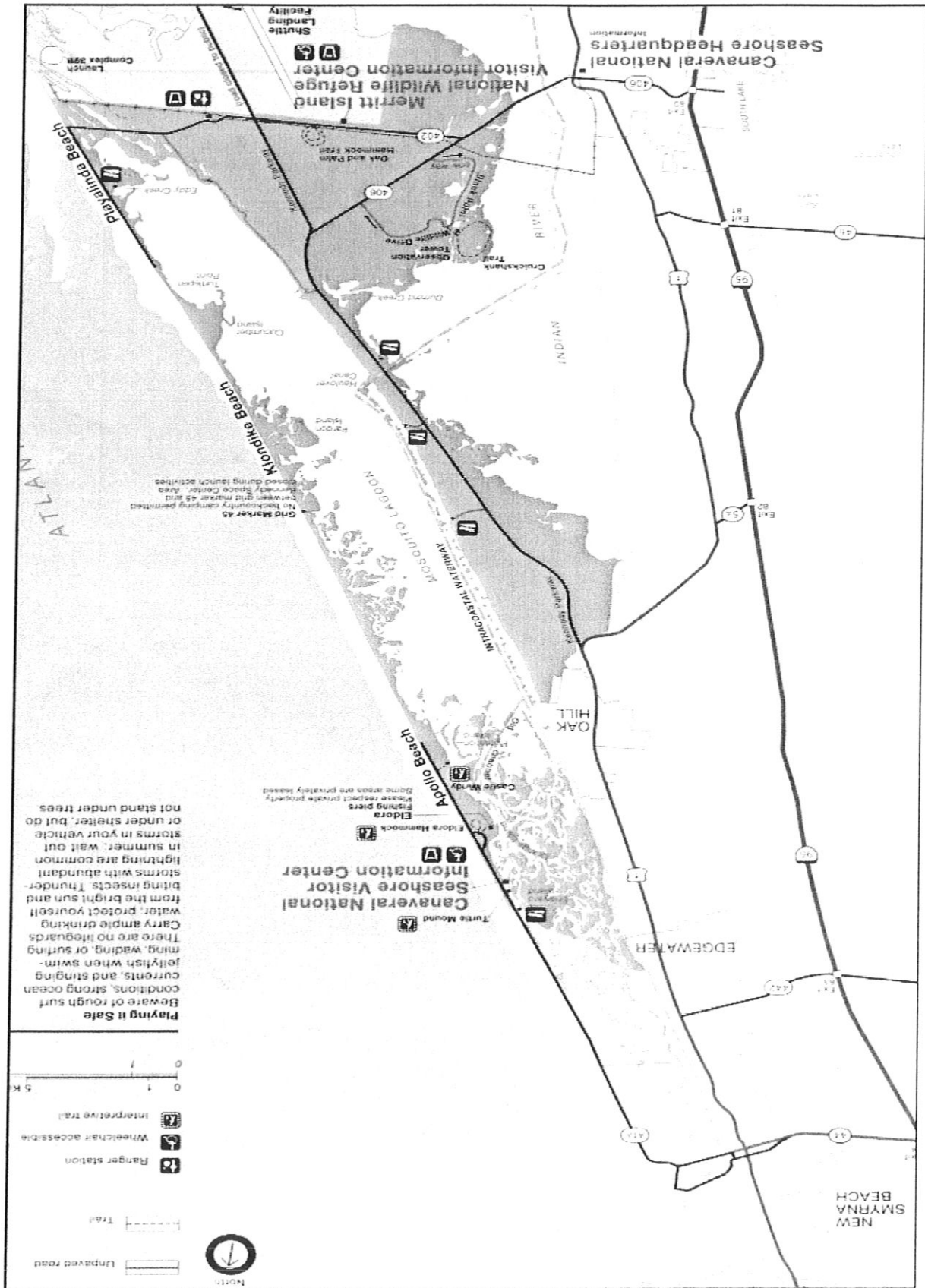
The park initiated sporadic patrols on four-wheeled all-terrain vehicles (ATV's) on April 6, 2001 to record sea turtle emergencies (nests and false crawls) and to screen nests. Daily patrols were started on May 9, 2001. The 24 miles of beach was divided into two 12 mile segments, each covered by a team consisting of a ranger and a volunteer. The teams worked from 11:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m., seven nights a week. In addition, daytime patrols were conducted at least three times a week to document any subsequent depredations to recorded nests. On August 11, 2001, patrols were switched to 4:00 a.m. to noon, due to a decrease in nesting and to enhance nest excavation activities.

Initial data collected for each nest included: date, nest number, species, grid, number of eggs depredated and sighting/treatment. Sighting/treatment referred to the condition of the nest upon discovery (undepredated, partially depredated or totally depredated) and the subsequent treatment (nest screened or left unscreened). Each nest was marked with a numbered stake for later identification. Date and grid location of each false crawl was also recorded.

The screening procedure consisted of placing a 4 feet x 4 feet wire mesh screen over the nest and staking down the corners with three foot sections of #3 rebar. The rebar was bent over near one end to form a 70 degree angle. The 2 inches x 4 inches mesh size was large enough to allow hatchlings to emerge while discouraging attempts by predators to reach the eggs. Partially depredated nests that retained a significant number of intact eggs had the broken eggs removed and were covered with clean sand.

During daytime patrols, all new nest depredations were recorded, the number of depredated eggs counted and all broken eggs removed from the beach. The latter was done to deter predators from easily relocating any remaining eggs and to prevent counting depredations more than once. If a significant number of viable eggs remained, broken eggs were removed and the nest was re-covered with clean sand.

Figure 1: Canaveral National Seashore



The stake for every tenth nest was marked with white spray paint for identification. After a minimum of 70 days, or 3 days after evidence of hatching, the nests were excavated and the following information recorded: number of hatchlings emerged (empty eggshells), number of unhatched eggs, number of live hatchlings in nest, number of dead hatchlings in nest and number of pipped eggs (hatchling still partially in eggshell). Depredated eggs recorded during daytime runs were added to the total of unhatched eggs prior to analysis. This data was then used to calculate average hatching success for the entire beach.

Fifty (50) nests were relocated for one of three reasons: 1) the nest was located at the base of a heavily traveled boardwalk; 2) the nest cavity and eggs had been fouled by the contents of broken eggs; 3) the nest was in imminent danger of erosion. Pits approximating the natural nest cavity were dug near the base of the dune. The eggs were then carefully transferred, buried and screened in the usual manner.

An attempt was made to remove individual raccoons that had learned how to repeatedly tunnel under the screens. These raccoons were captured using Tomahawk live-traps.

RESULTS

Nesting and False Crawl Totals

A total of 3274 sea turtle nests were deposited at CANA in 2001 - 3274 loggerhead, ten leatherback and 7 green (Table 1). Overall nest density was 86.04 per kilometer for the loggerhead, 0.26 per kilometer for the leatherback, and 0.18 per kilometer for the green.

The total number of loggerhead false crawls was 2112 or 55.14 per kilometer, a false crawl to nest ratio of 1:1.54 (Table 1). There were 10 green false crawls or 0.26 per kilometer, a false crawl to nest ratio of 1:0.70. Three leatherback false crawls were recorded or 0.08 per kilometer, for a false crawl to nest ratio of 1:3.33.

As in former years, the greatest concentration of nesting was noted in the southern half of CANA with 63.8% (2089) of the nests occurring in the South District (Brevard County) and 36.2% (1185) in the North District (Volusia County) (Table 1). Nesting densities were 103.4 and 65.5 per kilometer respectively. Figures 2a and 2b show the number of nests and false crawls by individual grids for the entire beach.

Initial Sighting and Nests Screened

In 2001, 98 percent (3207) of the 3274 nests deposited at CANA were screened, comprising 2906 undepredated and 301 partially depredated nests (Table 2, Initial Encounter). This included ten leatherback, 7 green and 3190 loggerhead nests.

A total of 67 (2.1%) of the loggerhead nests were totally depredated and 299 (9.2%) were partially depredated prior to discovery (Table 2, Initial Encounter).

No green depredations occurred prior to discovery. One of the ten leatherback nests was partially depredated.

Table 1: 2001 Marine Turtle Crawl Survey, Canaveral National Seashore.

Overall

	Loggerhead	Green	Leatherback	Total
Nests	3257	7	10	3274
False Crawls	2112	10	3	2125
Nest Density (nest/km)	86.0	0.2	0.3	85.5
FC Density (FC/km)	55.1	0.3	0.1	55.5
FC to Nest Ratio	1:1.54	1:0.70	1:3.33	1:1.54

Distribution by District

North District (Volusia county)

	Loggerhead	Green	Leatherback	Total
Nests	1179	1	5	1185
False Crawls	638	0	1	639
Nest Density (nest/km)	65.1	.06	0.28	65.5
FC Density (FC/km)	35.3	-	.06	35.3
FC to Nest Ratio	1:1.85	0:1.0	1:5.0	1:1.85

South District (Brevard County)

	Loggerhead	Green	Leatherback	Total
Nests	2078	6	5	2089
False Crawls	1474	10	2	1486
Nest Density (nest/km)	102.9	0.3	0.3	103.4
FC Density (FC/km)	73.0	0.5	0.1	73.6
FC to Nest Ratio	1:1.41	1:0.6	1:2.5	1:1.41

Figure 2a. Nests, False Crawls, Depredations, and Tunneling Activity.
Grids 0-44 (North District)-2001

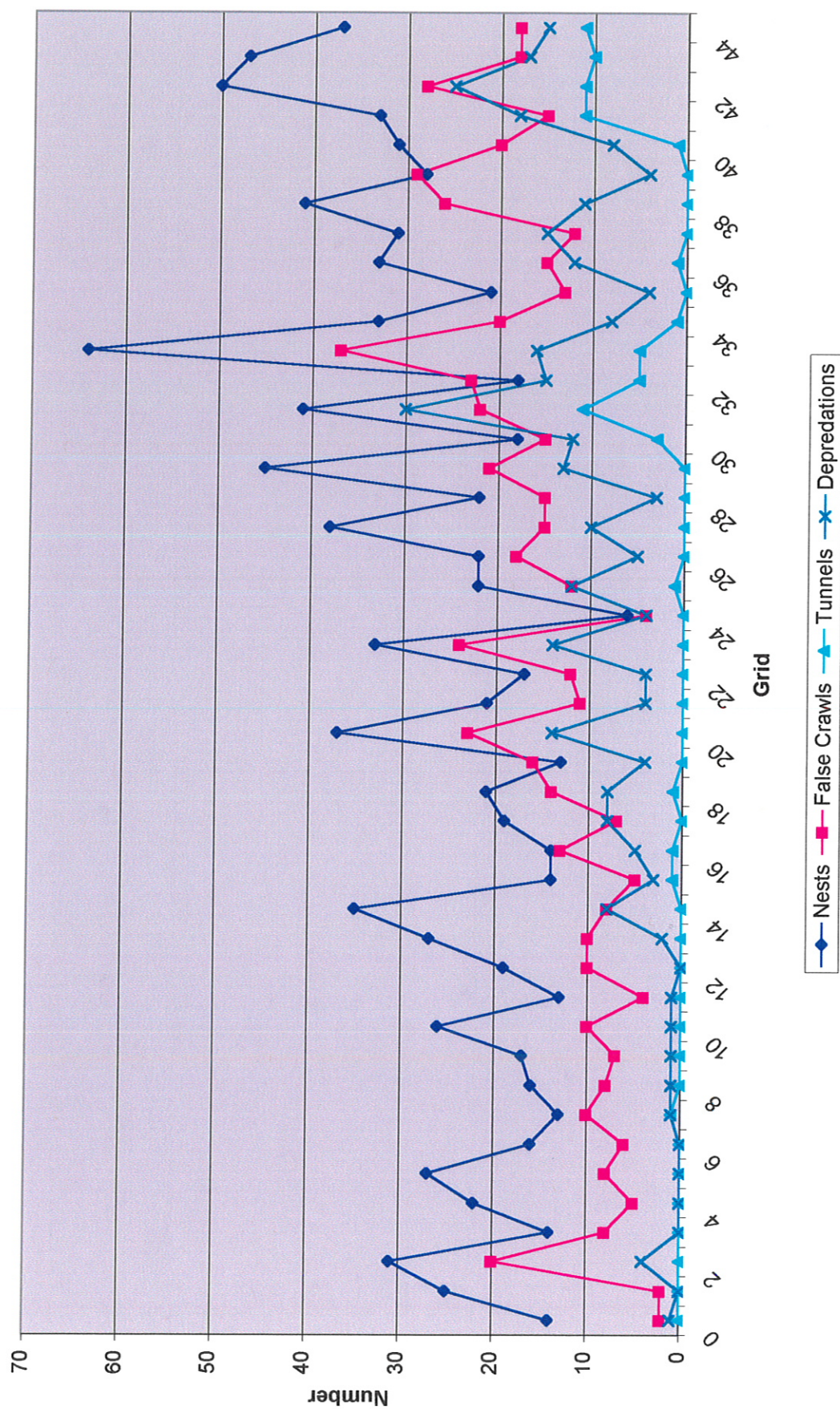


Figure 2b. Nests, False Crawls, Depredations, and Tunneling Activity.
Grids 45-94 (South District)-2001

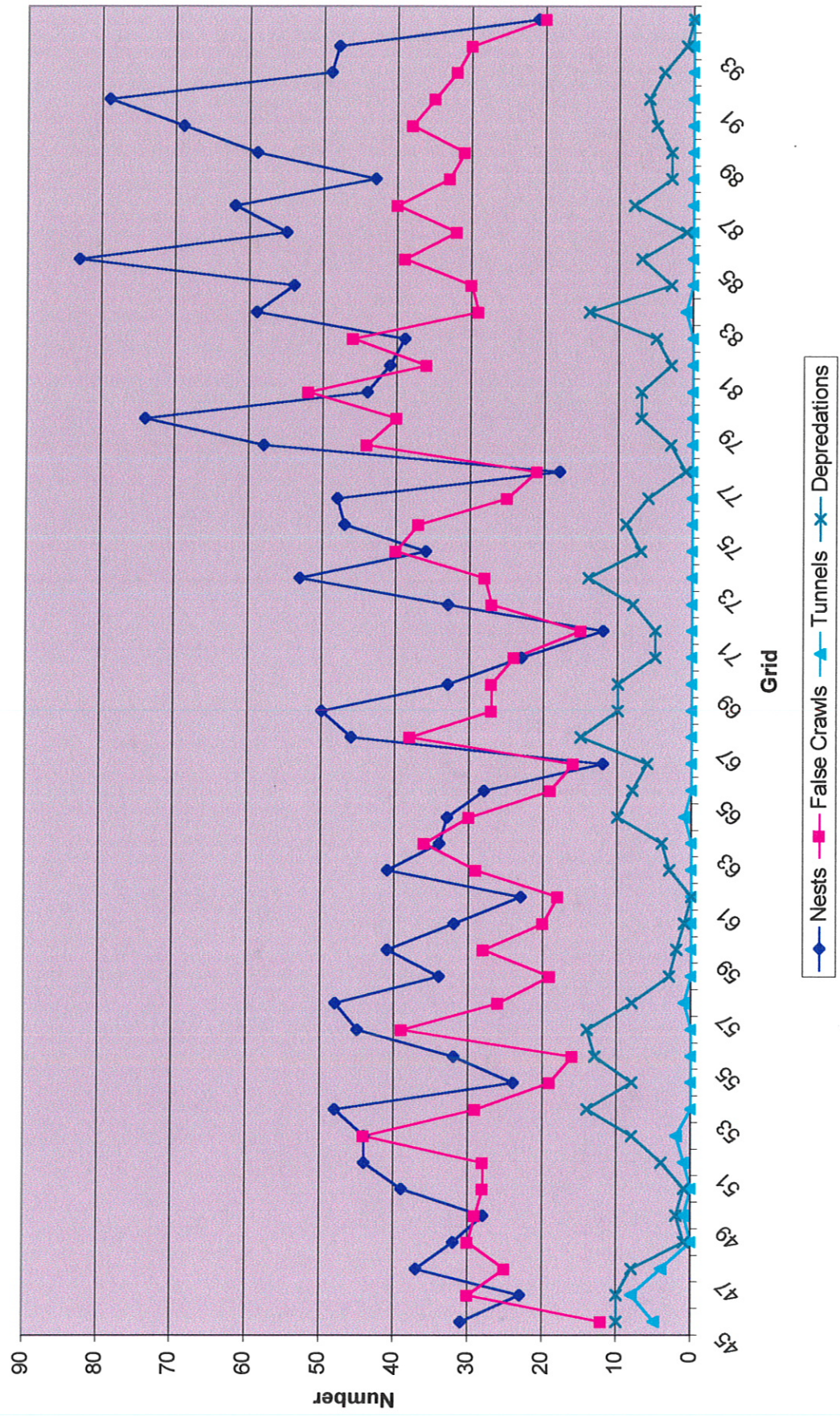


Table 2. Nest Treatment and Depredation, 2001. Canaveral National Seashore.

Initial Encounter

	Loggerhead	Green	Leatherback	Total
Not Dep/Screened	2890 (89%)	7 (100%)	9 (90%)	2906 (89%)
Part Dep/Screened	300 (09%)	0 (0%)	1 (10%)	301 (09%)
Total Depredation	67 (02%)	0 (0%)	0	67 (02%)
TOTAL	3257	7	10	3274

Part=Partial Dep=Depredation

Subsequent Depredation (G,I)

Screened Nests

	Loggerhead	Green	Leatherback	Total
North District	174	0	0	174 (15%)
South District	144	0	0	144 (07%)
Total	318	0	0	318 (10%)

Overall Depredation (Initial Encounter and Subsequent Depredation)

All Nests

	Loggerhead	Green	Leatherback	Total
Partial Depredation	518 (16%)*	0	1 (10%)	519 (16%)^
Total Depredation	132 (04%)	0	0	132 (04%)
Total	650 (20%)	0	1 (10%)	651 (20%)

* Percentages in species columns are derived from total number of nests for that species

^ Percentages in Total column are derived from total number of nests for all species (3274)

By District

	Loggerhead	Green	Leatherback	Total
North District	342	0	1	343 (29%)*
South District	308	0	0	308 (15%)*
Total	650	0	1	651 (20%)

* Percentages are derived from total number of nests in each district

Subsequent Depredations

Ten percent (318) of the screened nests were partially or totally depredated by predators that reached through the screens to get the upper layers of eggs or tunneled underneath the screens (Table 2, Subsequent Depredation). Tunneling was higher in the North District, with 15 percent (174) of the screened nests being depredated versus 6.8 percent (144) in the South District. Twenty (20) nests were recorded as being depredated more than once after screening (CANA files).

Overall, including both screened and unscreened nests and initial and subsequent depredations, 20 percent (650) of the loggerhead, none of the green, and 10 percent (1) of the leatherback nests were either partially or totally depredated during the 2001 season (Table 2, Overall Depredation, All Nests). Specifically, four percent (132) of the loggerhead nests were totally depredated and 16 percent (518) were partially depredated. The single leatherback depredation was a partial.

As in past years, the highest percentage of depredations (partial and total) occurred in the North District, where 29 percent (343) of the nests were depredated, compared to 15 percent (308) in the South District (Table 2, Overall Depredation, By District). 20 percent (651) of the nests deposited at CANA were either partially or totally depredated.

A small number of problem raccoons ("tunnelers") were removed from the beach during the nesting season.

Monitored Nests

Every tenth loggerhead nest was marked for excavation after the incubation period to determine hatching success. Of the 321 marked loggerhead nests, 257 (80%) were excavated (Table 3). Two-hundred-and-seventeen (217) of these were undepredated and 49 partially or totally depredated. Hatching success for undepredated nests was 69% and 36% for depredated nests. Combining the two yields a hatching rate of 64%.

Average clutch size was 101.0 eggs for undepredated nests and 95.5 for depredated nests. If an estimated 901 eggs are added to the unhatched total to represent 9 totally depredated nests where an egg count could not be made (9 nests times average clutch size of 100.1 eggs = 901 eggs), the adjusted hatching success is 62%.

An estimated number of loggerhead hatchlings was calculated, based on the hatching success of marked nests. This was done as follows:

$(62\% \text{ hatchling success}) \times (100.1 \text{ eggs/clutch}) \times (3274 \text{ nests}) = 203,191 \text{ hatchlings.}$

Fifty-five (17%) marked nests were of unknown fate (Table 3).

Table 3. Hatching Success of marked Nests, 2001. Canaveral National Seashore.

Loggerhead

	Non-depredated	Depredated	Overall
Nests marked	264	57	321
Nests Excavated	217	40	257
Total Eggs	21,924	3,814	25,738
Ave. Clutch Size	101.0	95.5	100.1
Hatchlings Emerged	15,162	1,372	16,534
Hatching Success	69%	36%	64.2%
Nests Destroyed by Depredation	N/A	9	9 (03%)
Adjusted Hatching Success*	N/A	29.3%	62%
Eroded/Unknown Fate	47 (18%)	8 (14%)	55 (17%)

* Adding average clutch size for 25 totally depredated nests where egg count not possible

Leatherback

	Non-depredated	Depredated	Overall
Nests marked	9	1	10
Nests Excavated	9	1	10
Total Eggs	655	56	711
Ave. Clutch Size	72.8	56	71.1
Hatchlings Emerged	197	27	224
Hatching Success*	31%	48	31.5%
Nests Destroyed by Depredation	N/A	0	N/A
Eroded/Unknown Fate	0	0	0

None of the seven marked green nests were excavated.

All ten leatherback nests were excavated. One was partially depredated with a loss of 29 out of 56 eggs. Average clutch size was 71.1 eggs with a hatching success of 31.5 percent and a total of 224 hatchlings (Table 3).

DISCUSSION

Nesting and False Crawl Totals

The 3274 nests recorded at CANA in 2001 were the lowest total since 1997 (Table 4). True to form, the green continued the up and down pattern exhibited every year except one (1989) since 1985 (Figure 3).

The loggerhead nesting pattern also fluctuates, although it is less predictable (Figure 4). The ten leatherback nests recorded exceeded the previous high reported in 1999 and 2000 by one (Table 4).

With a false crawl to nest ratio of 1:1.54, the number of loggerhead nests exceeded false crawls for the fourteenth time in the last 17 years (Table 5). The three years that it did not, the ratio was almost one-to-one (1998-1:0.99; 1988-1:0.94; and 1986-1:0.98). While green false crawls exceeded nests in the past two years, with almost identical values of 1:0.71 and 1:0.70, nests exceeded false crawls in ten of the past 16 years (Table 5). Leatherback nest totals exceeded false crawls in nine of 12 years (Table 5). In two years they were equal; only once did leatherback false crawls exceed nests.

Screening Activity and Nest Depredation

Ninety-eight percent (3207) of the sea turtle nests deposited at CANA in 2001 were screened. Overall nest depredation was slightly lower, dropping from 23.0 percent to 19.9 percent (Table 6). The depredation rate has fluctuated between 29.9 and 14.8 percent since 1993, when daytime runs were implemented to detect subsequent depredations to nests.

Tunneling activity, digging under the screens to reach the eggs, rose slightly from 7.2 percent in 2000 to 9.9 percent in 2001 (Table 6). Since 1985, tunneling has ranged from 18.7 percent in 1988 to 1.9 percent in 1990. The unusually high value in 1988 was almost twice that of any prior year.

The yearly oscillations in depredation and tunneling are likely tied to periodic fluctuations in the raccoon population and number of experienced animals foraging on the beach (i.e. individuals that have learned to tunnel). There is always potential for an explosion in the raccoon population at the park. Kramer (1996) noted breeding in most months of the year at CANA. There are ample food resources and natural predators are absent. Although park staff works hard to remove trash, refuse from one million visitors a year adds to the food source. When periods of little disease coincide with the above, periodic surges in the raccoon population at CANA are inevitable. Natural factors, such as distemper, serve to return the raccoon population to lower levels.

Table 4. Sea Turtle Nest Totals, 1984-2001. Canaveral National Seashore.

YEAR	LOGGERHEAD	GREEN	LEATHERBACK	UNKNOWN	TOTAL
2001	3257	7	10		3274
2000	3892	662	9		4563
1999	4501	5	9		4515
1998	3976	427	5		4408
1997	2702	21	4		2727
1996	3260	222	3		3485
1995	4121	47	1		4169
1994	3886	364	2		4252
1993	3140	28	0		3168
1992	3279	298	0		3577
1991	4074	25	1		4100
1990	3922	185	1		4108
1989	3091	41	1		3133
1988	2203	43	0	4	2250
1987	1670	90	1	15	1776
1986	3349	22	3		3374
1985	2389	94	0	25	2508
1984	*				2125

* = Individual breakdown not available.

Taken from yearly Sea Turtle Nesting Summaries, 1984-2001, Canaveral National Seashore, Titusville, Florida.

FIGURE 3. GREEN SEA TURTLE NESTING TOTALS
 CANAVERAL NATIONAL SEASHORE 1985-2001

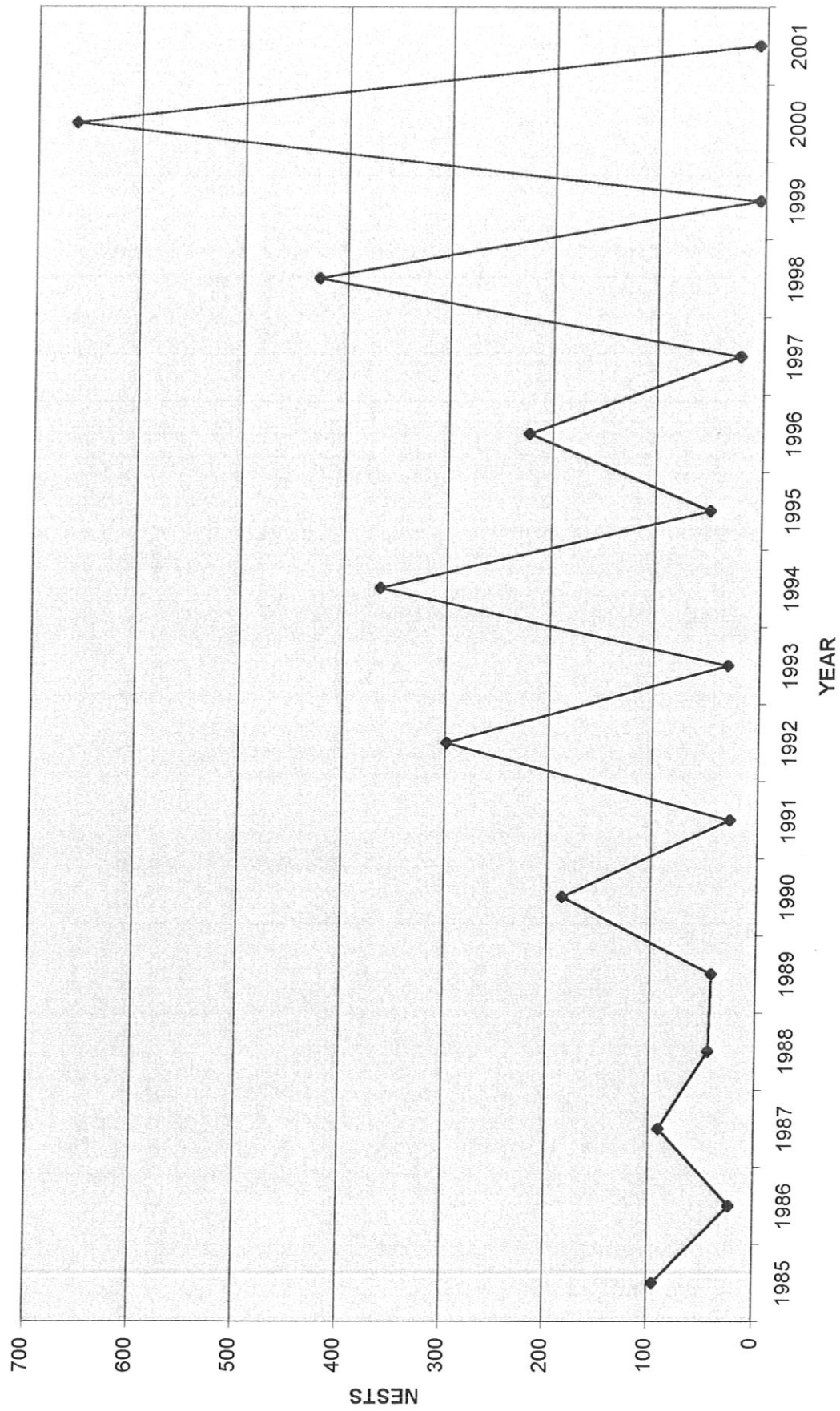


FIGURE 4. LOGGERHEAD SEA TURTLE NESTING TOTALS
CANAVERAL NATIONAL SEASHORE 1985-2001.

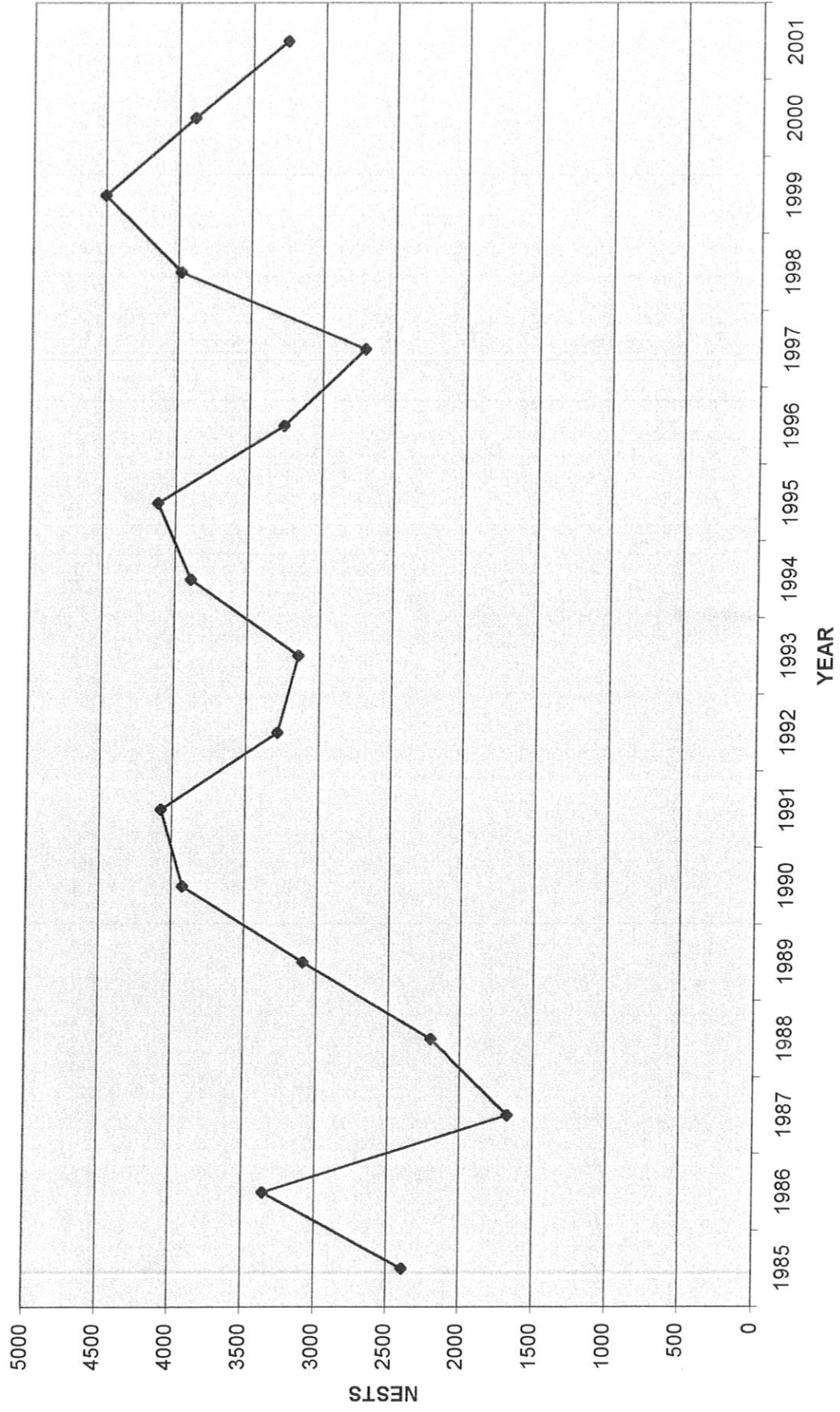


Table 5. False Crawl to Nest Ratio, 1984-2001. Canaveral National Seashore.

Year	Loggerhead	Green	Leatherback
2001	1:1.54	1:0.70	1:5.00
2000	1:1.02	1:0.71	1:3.00
1999	1:1.20	1:0.63	1:3.00
1998	1:0.99	1:0.52	1:0.63
1997	1:1.19	1:0.72	0:4.00
1996	1:1.32	1:0.77	1:1.00
1995	1:1.36	1:1.21	0:1.00
1994	1:1.60	1:1.38	0:2.00
1993	1:1.46	1:1.87	--
1992	1:1.43	1:1.10	--
1991	1:1.10	1:1.66	0:1.00
1990	1:1.31	1:1.17	1:1.00
1989	1:1.53	1:3.00	--
1988	1:0.94	1:1.16	--
1987	1:1.02	1:0.72	0:1.00
1986	1:0.98	1:0.76	0:3.00
1985	1:1.22	1:1.02	--
1984	--	--	--

Taken from yearly Sea Turtle Nesting Summaries, 1984-2001, Canaveral National Seashore, Titusville, Florida.

Table 6. Amount of Screening and Depredation of Screened Nests, 1984-2001.
Canaveral National Seashore.

YEAR	NESTS	NESTS SCREENED	SCREENED NESTS DEPREDATED (%)	ESTIMATED OVERALL DEPREDATION (%)
2001	3274	3207 (98%)	9.9	19.9
2000	4563	4304 (94%)	7.2	23.0
1999	4515	4311 (95%)	8.2	22.2
1998	4408	4233 (96%)	7.2	19.3
1997	2727	2510 (92%)	9.6	29.9
1996	3485	3198 (92%)	5.7	19.7
1995	4169	3975 (95%)	4.8	14.8
1994	4252	1724 (41%)	4.3	18.7
1993	3168	1221 (39%)	7.6	28.6
1992	3579	2213 (62%)	4.3 *	11.6 *
1991	4100	1507 (37%)	3.3 *	13.9 *
1990	4108	1547 (38%)	1.9 *	9.2 *
1989	3132	1030 (33%)	3.4	17.5
1988	2250	887 (39%)	18.7	64.1
1987	1776	766 (43%)	7.2	58.7
1986	3374	1517 (45%)	3.7	47.3
1985	2508	1023 (41%)	5.0	41.7
1984	2125	213 (19%)	----	65.0

* Daytime runs to check secondary nest depredation were not conducted on a regular basis.

Hatching Success

The target level for hatching success was 60 percent, established in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service sea turtle recovery plans (NMFS and USFWS 1991). This was achieved with a rate of 69% in undepredated nests, 64% overall and 62% when adding in totally depredated nests (Table 3). None of the seven green nests were excavated. The success rate for partially depredated loggerhead nests was much lower, 36 percent for the 40 nests that were evaluated. In 2000, the hatching rate of partially depredated nests was thirty-seven percent. However, most of the unhatched eggs were those destroyed by predators prior to discovery. Of the undamaged eggs remaining in the nests (after broken eggs were removed and the nest screened), 55 percent hatched. In 2000, fifty-seven percent of the undamaged eggs hatched. This indicates that the effort to clean up and screen partially depredated eggs can save a significant portion of the remaining eggs. Combining totals from partially depredated, totally depredated and undepredated nests lowered overall hatching success to 56 percent for both loggerhead and green turtles.

To ensure that all eggs in the marked nests were accounted for, daytime patrols were implemented at least three times a week to record any eggs lost to nest depredation. The average clutch size for partially depredated loggerhead nests was 5.5 eggs less (101.0 versus 95.5) (Table 3). This indicates that keeping a tally of depredated eggs throughout the season and adding them to the total clutch size when excavations are done is a fairly accurate indicator of actual clutch size. Average clutch size of undepredated nests was only 0.2 of an egg less than in 2000 (101.0 to 101.2).

Leatherback hatching success was 31.5 percent, based on the excavation of ten nests (Table 3). This is within the range observed over the previous five years (23% to 56%) (Table 7). Loggerhead hatching success equaled the previous high of 64 percent in 1998.

Table 7. Comparison of Hatching Success with Previous Years, 1996-2001.
Canaveral National Seashore

	Loggerhead	Green	Leatherback
2001	64% (62%)	-	31.5% (N/A)
2000	61% (56%)	56% (N/A)	38% (N/A)
1999	62% (53%)	64% (55%)	29% (N/A)
1998	64% (62%)	71% (N/A)	56% (42%)
1997	55% (49%)	51% (N/A)	23% (N/A)
1996	59% (53%)	65% (N/A)	27% (N/A)

(%) Percentages in parentheses are adjusted hatching rates, adding in average clutch size for totally depredated nests.

Impact of High Tides

Hurricane Gabrielle brushed the area in mid-September causing a four to five foot storm surge and washing away a number of nests and nest markers. Because of this, about 750 nests laid late in the season could not be relocated and are of unknown fate.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

2001 was another successful year for CANA's sea turtle nest protection program. This was due to the efforts of many dedicated volunteers, interns, and employees. The accomplishments included recording, screening and evaluating over 3,000 sea turtle nests along Canaveral National Seashore's 24 miles of beach. Don Mock provided training, maintained supplies and kept the fleet of ATV's running. The three seasonal employees, Shawn Batchelder, Michelle DeLong and Sean McKenna, took unexpected obstacles in stride and always managed to complete the task. The three Student Conservation Association (SCA) resource assistants, Heather Laher, Jessica McGettigan, and Heather Hollis, provided regular depredation patrols and handled the huge database. Their enthusiasm and energy were greatly appreciated by the park staff. The park's maintenance, ranger and administrative divisions were most helpful with a myriad of operational details. And then there were the 60 volunteers who sacrificed sleep and comfort to brave the insects, humidity and storms, all at no pay, to help the cause of sea turtle preservation. They were a daily source of inspiration and reminded us nightly what the program was all about. Thanks to you all.

LITERATURE CITED

Canaveral National Seashore Files, National Park Service, Titusville, Florida.

Canaveral National Seashore. 1984 - 2000 sea turtle nesting summaries. Unpublished. National Park Service, Titusville, Florida.

Kramer, M. T. 1996. Reproductive biology and preliminary investigations of Levonorgestrel as a contraceptive for managing raccoons at Canaveral National Seashore, Florida, Master's Thesis In Warren, R. J. 1996. Final Project Report - Raccoon ecology and depredation of sea turtle nests at Canaveral National Seashore, Florida. Daniel B. Warnell School of Forest Resources, University of Georgia, Athens. 172pp.

McMurtray, J. D. 1986. Reduction of raccoon depredation on sea turtle nests at Canaveral National Seashore, Florida. CPSU Technical Report 20. University of Georgia, Athens. 52 pp.

National Marine Fisheries Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1991. Recovery plan for U.S. population of loggerhead turtle. National marine Fisheries Service, Washington, D. C.

National Marine Fisheries Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1991. Recovery plan for U.S. population of Atlantic green turtle. National Marine Fisheries Service, Washington, D. C.

Ratnaswamy, M. J. 1995. Raccoon depredation of sea turtle nests at Canaveral National Seashore, Florida: Implications for species management and conservation. Daniel B. Warnell School of Forest Resources, University of Georgia, Athens. 79pp.

Warren, R. J. 1996. Final project report - Raccoon ecology and depredation of sea turtle nests at Canaveral National Seashore, Florida. Daniel B. Warnell School of Forest Resources, University of Georgia, Athens. 172pp.