

Marine Turtle Newsletter

KEMP'S RIDLEY SEA TURTLES NEST IN SOUTH TEXAS

From 1979-1994, seven confirmed Kemp's ridley sea turtle (*Lepidochelys kempii*) nests were documented on the Texas coast (Shaver 1994), virtually all at Padre Island National Seashore. In contrast, four nests laid in late May and mid-June 1995 were found on south Texas beaches: one at Mustang Island on 29 May, two at Padre Island National Seashore on 30 May, and one at Mustang Island on 16 June. Three of these turtles were located by visitors and one by a National Park Service employee conducting a patrol for nesting turtles. None of the four turtles bore obvious tags, tag scars, or living tags. However, a Kemp's ridley observed and photographed by a visitor as she was returning to the sea at Mustang Island on 17 May 1995, did have a tag scar. Unfortunately, high winds obliterated the tracks and prohibited scientists from determining an exact nest location at that site.

The increase in Kemp's ridley nesting in south Texas could be reflective of the overall Kemp's ridley population increase (as measured in recent years on Mexican nesting beaches) or could be a positive result of experimental efforts to establish a secondary nesting colony of this species at Padre Island National Seashore (see Shaver 1989, 1990, 1992). Unfortunately, it was impossible to determine whether the turtles were part of the attempt to establish a secondary nesting colony. To date, no turtles from this project have been documented nesting at any location outside captivity. The small numbers of eggs found in three of the four clutches [88, 79 (including 3 eggs broken by the nesting turtle), 67 (including 5 small eggs), and 104] may be indicative of young turtles and/or turtles that were raised in captivity (David Owens, Texas A&M Univ., pers. comm.). Average clutch size, calculated over 14 years at primary nesting grounds in Mexico, is 100.8 eggs, with annual averages ranging from 96.5 to 103.8 eggs (FWS/NMFS, 1992).

The eggs from all four clutches were retrieved from the nest sites for protected incubation and should hatch during mid-July and early August; the hatchlings will be released at their respective nest sites. Since the Kemp's ridley nesting season extends through July, it is possible that additional nesting will be located this year and the origin of the nesting turtles possibly determined through investigation of more individuals.

Fish and Wildlife Service / National Marine Fisheries Service. 1992. Recovery Plan for the Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle (*Lepidochelys kempii*). U. S. National Marine Fisheries Service, St. Petersburg, Florida. 40 pp.

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