



Officials report near-record year for loggerhead sea turtle nests

By Craig Pittman, Times Staff Writer

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ST. PETERSBURG — Tropical Storm Debby tore up Florida's gulf beaches right in the middle of the nesting season for loggerhead sea turtles.

Yet sea turtle nesting came close to a record high this year, according to biologists with the state's Fish and Wildlife Research Institute in St. Petersburg. They're hopeful this is a sign of continued improvement for the loggerhead, listed as a threatened species — although they acknowledge that counting nests is not the same as counting turtle hatchlings.

Along the 250 miles of beaches checked this year, volunteers counted 58,172 loggerhead nests, one of the highest counts since monitoring began in 1989.

The all-time record of 59,918 nests was set in 1998, but the count hit a low of 28,074 in 2007.

"After a steep decline in Florida loggerhead nesting between 1998 and 2007, nesting has risen over the past five years," said Blair Witherington, a scientist with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. "We're pleased to see this increase, but we recognize that loggerheads, and other sea turtle species, still face many challenges."

However, Witherington noted, the number of nests does not necessarily correlate with the number of turtle eggs that hatched. He said biologists are still working on their estimates of how many hatchlings climbed out of the sand and trundled toward the ocean.

Florida is crucial to the survival of loggerheads. Ninety percent of all loggerhead nesting in the United States occurs in Florida.

From May until September, thousands of female sea turtles — loggerheads and other species — crawl up on Florida beaches, dig a hole and drop in a clutch of eggs, then cover it back up and swim away. The turtles that lay the eggs are returning to the beaches where they themselves hatched some 30 years before.

Loggerhead nesting had been surging this year when Tropical Storm Debby hit in June, destroying scores of nests.

"Obviously there's a lot of devastation," David Yates of the Clearwater Marine Aquarium, which coordinates sea turtle nesting surveys on most of Pinellas' beaches, said at the time. "We were having the best year in 15 years, and now we've had a substantial washing away."

South of the Tampa Bay area, researchers from Mote Marine Laboratory in Sarasota checking on the 1,367 nests they had marked before the storm between Longboat Key and Venice found markers remained for only 244 nests. And David Godfrey of the Sea Turtle Conservancy, the world's oldest sea turtle research and conservation group, said that along the Gulf Coast up to the Panhandle, "so far we're hearing that as many as half or more were lost."

But state sea turtle biologist Anne Meylan warned everyone then that those estimates may be based on the loss of nest markers, not the nests.

"Losing your stakes isn't the same thing as losing the nests," noted Meylan, pointing out that as a result, "it's premature to have any estimate of an impact."

Sure enough, the Clearwater Marine Aquarium count hit 200 nests this year, "a record-breaking season," said spokeswoman Krista Rosado, adding, "It was not as devastating as what some folks thought it would be, including us."

Green turtles and leatherbacks, which are listed as federally endangered species, also nest on Florida beaches, primarily on the east coast.

Since tracking of turtle nesting began in 1989, green turtle nesting in Florida has increased about tenfold. This year, the statewide survey found 6,054 green turtle nests. For the 2012 season, the survey counted 515 leatherback nests. Only 45 leatherback nests were counted on the same beaches in 1989.

Hatchlings are continuing to emerge from nests through November, so state officials are asking everyone to stay back if they spot any turtles on the beach. Beach residents should also remove beach furniture and other objects from the beach at night so there is a clear path for hatchlings to make it to the water.

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