

The soft glint of moonlight plays on the breaking waves. The horizon holds sweet promises of far away seas. This is the time, under cover of mid-to-late-summer nights, when hatchling loggerhead turtles emerge from the safety of dark dunes along the Carolina coast and scurry across the sand and into the surf. Then, these two-inch-long infants swim for their lives, paddling as fast as they can for 24 hours until they reach the Gulf Stream. From there, the growing turtles drift to the North Atlantic Gyre system, where they will spend a decade of their lives. Ultimately, loggerheads find homes in the waters of the Sargasso Sea, the Azores, the Mediterranean. When they reach sexual maturity, around 25 to 30 years of age, females will start the life cycle over by crawling ashore towards the dark dunes. By then, they can weigh up to 350 pounds.

South Carolina's shores offer some of the most pristine nesting grounds as well as safe havens for this endangered species. Local ordinances, laws and 19 nest

protection programs dotted along the coast help loggerheads slowly increase their number.

From Myrtle Beach State Park to Cape Island, where research on the turtles began in the 1930s, to Daufuskie Island, a variety of programs pool the resources of professionals and volunteers to ensure that loggerheads have the greatest chance of success.

"Loggerheads are one of our toughest conservation issues," says Sally Murphy, biologist with the SC Department of Natural Resources Marine Turtle Conservation Program. After they've braved the open ocean, survived fishing gear that can trap and kill them, evaded natural predators, the thing that might spoil it all is light.

"Visitors need to be aware of local ordinances that require beachfront homes to turn off lights." In most areas along the coast, from May to October, lights must be out from 10pm to 6am. Hatchling turtles, normally drawn to moonlight on the surf, can become disoriented and spend their energy

running toward bright artificial light and away from the ocean. Of every 10,000 eggs, only one will survive to maturity. Females nest every two to three years and lay an average of 126 eggs per nest in three or four clutches between May and August.

On Pritchard's Island, Herman "Bo" Von Harten, island manager, and his team measure and tag nesting females and move nests into nearby hatcheries before the tides and raccoons can do their damage. Both Von Harten and Murphy encourage all who are curious about the official South Carolina State Reptile to join one of the many turtle walks offered along the coast on summer evenings. Such strolls offer education and glimpses at these amazing animals in ways that encourage their survival. If they are lucky, walkers may chance upon mothers creating nest chambers, or palm-of-your-hand-sized hatchlings that answer the call of the moon and the ocean and begin the journey that will carry them from South Carolina to the far side of the Atlantic and back.

Find out more...

SC Department of Natural Resources  
[www.dnr.state.sc.us/marine/turtles](http://www.dnr.state.sc.us/marine/turtles)



# SOUTH CAROLINA LOGGERHEADS

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