



The Junior Beach Club and nearby neighbors enjoy Donna Michaux's turtle program



Released at nest excavation, a loggerhead turtle heads to the sea

Sea Turtle Protection: It takes a Community

The working title for this story was “Bird Man Meets Turtle Lady”. Knowing very little about nesting sea turtles, I began my education by attending a presentation on the beach. It was given by the Turtle Lady, Donna Michaux, for the Oak Island Preservation Society's Junior Beach Club and the public.

During August, I made four more trips to gain on-the-sand experience and talk to a few of the hundreds of folk involved in this season's Oak Island Sea Turtle Protection Program. I quickly understood that this was much more than a story about the survival a wonderful creature...the most ancient of creatures. It would evolve into a story about humans at their best, a “community” of diverse individuals and groups, bonded together by a noble cause.

The NC Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC) is the overall manager of the protection program for the entire coast and the Oak Island program operates under their permit. Protection programs include walking sections of beach each morning from May through August looking for tracks of mother turtles to locate their nest and then monitoring nests as hatching nears.

Nest parents, seasoned volunteers paired with less experienced volunteers, are designated. The Junior Beach Club, at the direction of Donna, Stacey Taylor, and Madge Matteo, served as parents for several nests.

In May, female sea turtles start laying eggs in holes approximately eighteen inches deep that they dig in the sand. Once eggs are deposited, females then fill the holes, leaving the warm sand to incubate their clutch of eggs.

It takes about two months for incubation so volunteers begin to monitor the nests closely after day 50. To date, Oak Island's average 2010 incubation period has been 56 days.

Turtles may take several days for all to hatch and to crawl to near the surface. When ready, they break the surface and scramble to the sea in a group effort that makes the sand “boil”. Mostly this happens at night under optimal conditions including high tide and plenty of moonlight to lead them into the sea. Most make it without human help; however a larger percentage makes it with community protection.

Once they get past predators like ghost crabs and other perils on the beach, female hatchlings must survive 25-30 years to reach sexual maturity. They then return to their natal beach every two or three years to nest. Males never come back to land.

The nest at the class site had an indentation in the sand, often an early sign of a pending boil, so I joined several volunteers returning the next night to stand vigil. Unfortunately, the young had left before daybreak. A vacationer and his family from Northern Virginia, along with other beach people, guided about 100 loggerhead hatchlings to the ocean!

That was my first experience with the unpredictability of turtle hatchings. I wasn't disappointed because I had low expectations on seeing a boil on my first opportunity and, from the experiences of others, knew it might take many hours over many trips.

I enjoyed talking to those who came up and told their “boil and crawl” stories...it had been a "community effort" among several relative strangers and volunteers to help the survival of sea creatures whose DNA is more appropriate for prehistoric times.

Three days or so after hatching, experienced volunteers excavate each nest and inventory its contents, counting shells of those that hatched, unfertilized eggs that did not hatch, and turtles that died.

Many times one or more live turtles are still in the nest and need to be uncovered and led to the sea. I attended a nest excavation and was rewarded with being able to watch two freed hatchlings.

I helped monitor another nest that night. Seven turtles had already left so expectations were high for the main boil happening before morning. I chased one ghost crab all the way down the runway to water with broom trying to swat it. The crab seemed to be waiting for turtles to emerge as if it could hear them.

I left at 3AM without seeing turtles because I was getting sleepy and mosquitoes started to bite once the sea breeze died. Trust me, it is very tough to spread bug spray on sandy legs. Donna later found tracks that indicated two more crawled out between me leaving and her checking the nest at 8AM.

At a later excavation, I talked to Elise Bowers and her daughter, Katie Kehlor, of Harleysville, PA. Like many they have been coming back to the same cottage for several years, expecting the turtle program to be part of their vacation. They had been fortunate to see the “amazing and beautiful” boil of the nest being excavated.

For more information, I visited Oak Island Parks and Recreation Director Kellie Beeson who is responsible for the local program. Kellie has been part of the turtle program for 18

years and still takes her turn with early morning beach rides looking for tracks of mothers and babies.

According to Beeson: "Female turtles return every two weeks or so to lay additional clutches, possibly laying four to seven over a summer. So far this summer, we have found 58 nests which are averaging 97 eggs per nest for those hatched."

There are, however, many unknowns. NCWRC is participating in a multi-state genetic mark program to study population dynamics and develop recovery plans for loggerheads. One egg is removed from each nest and its DNA is being used to identify and track the mother. "To date six Oak Island females have been identified including one that had two nests...one in our area and another at Caswell Beach" stated Beeson.

Throughout my adventure, Donna and her kids, Savanna and John Macon, provided help with information and logistics. "I have this internal desire and passion to educate others on sea turtles and their effort for survival." said Michaux, who started as a turtle volunteer in 1983. "It is great turning all these people on to turtles because then they will care about and protect what they love!"

Savanna and John are both interested in marine science careers. John exclaimed: "Sea turtles are awesome! It's great to be able to help them get safely to the water and start their lives." Savanna added: "It is so neat to stay out on the beach at night in the hopes of being there when the hatchlings boil and making sure no predators get the turtles as they flipper into the water".

I hope to continue my education next summer and see a boil first hand. For more details and to learn how to volunteer, surf to the NCWRC website I used for scientific background: <http://www.seaturtle.org/groups/ncwrc>. See you on the beach!

John Ennis



Volunteers build “runways” to ensure hatchlings are funneled toward the ocean and away from the dunes



Approaching the water's edge, a hatchling's crawl leads to a life at sea



The “turtle protection community” escorts excavated turtles to the water



Volunteers and neighbors watch a loggerhead hatchling head for the sea

Post-publish emails:

From: Stacey Taylor [mailto:oi.jrbeachclub@yahoo.com]

Sent: Wednesday, September 22, 2010 10:04 PM

To: Amy Anderson; Stephen Polly Anton; Blacklock; Blake; Brooke Blum; Lori Boldt; Lori Bond; Stephanie Bumgarner; Cheryl and Mike Carney; Katie Clark; Carol Connelley; Stephanie Crotty; Casey Cunningham; Karen Derr; Ann Duncan; Joy Dunn; Kim Earwood; John Ennis; Connie Fabel; Lauren Fenicle; Laura and Mac Fitzhugh; Cynde Garlan; Kim Gauldin; Felicia Goble; Sophie Goliber; Ellen Goodwin; Kelly Gray; Jan Grouge; Stephanie Hilt; Katie Holmes; Susanna Williams and Jay Sharpe; Michael LeBron; Julie Linder; Terry Little; Gail Luntsford; Madge Matteo; Donna Michaux; Miki; Garlan Miles; Kim Miller; Mandy Ratzloff; Michele Reich; Greb Reich II; Melaney Robbins; Terri Rogers; I SawBigFoot; Kelly Shannon; Rusty and Traci Stewart; Chris and Mary Tate; Stacey Taylor; Shann Thomas; Kathy Waggoner; Bob Rachel Haley White; Jennifer Williams

Subject: Turtle Article in State Port Pilot

Dear OI Jr. Beachers,

Please check out the amazing story written by John Ennis. He has included his photos and documented his experience with loggerhead sea turtles that began at our Turtle Talk this summer! It is a wonderful story with great facts about turtles. Thank you John for including our Jr. Beach Club members in your article.

A job well done!

To read this article, pick up a copy in your local store. If you are far away from OI, you can access it at <http://ee.stateportpilot.com/edition/edition/?haspdf=1> in the Portfolio section.

Have a great fall and winter!

Stacey Taylor
OI Jr. Beach Club