

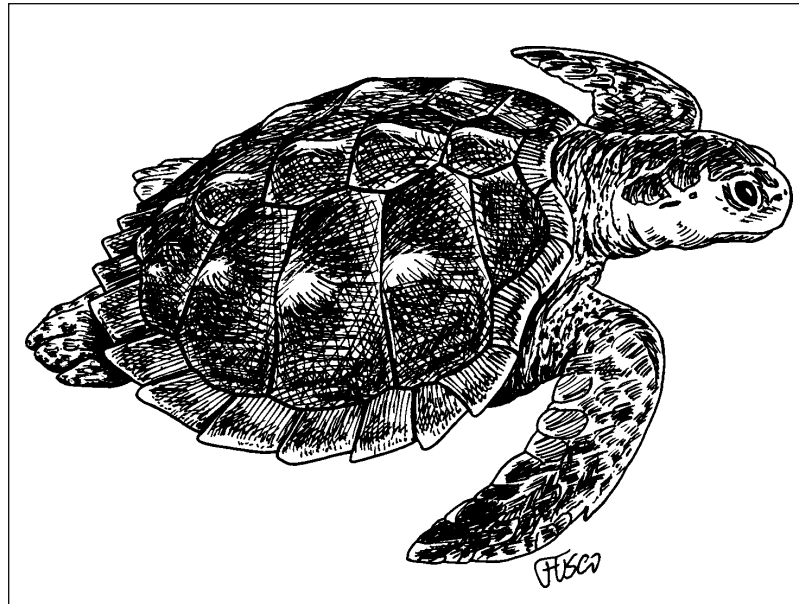
WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

ENDANGERED AND THREATENED SPECIES SERIES

KEMP'S (Atlantic) RIDLEY SEA TURTLE

Lepidochelys kempii

ENDANGERED



Habitat: Red mangrove subtropical shorelines or shallow coastal and estuarine waters.

Weight: 80-100 pounds.

Length: 23-27.5 inches.

Life Expectancy: Actual documentation of age is rare. Lifespan is estimated to be 50 years or more.

Food: Primarily spider crabs and other hard-shelled sea animals (shrimp, snails, sea stars), and occasionally marine plants.

Status: Federally and state endangered.

Identification: The Kemp's ridley sea turtle has often been confused with the larger but similar-looking loggerhead turtle. The Kemp's ridley can be identified by its yellow plastron (bottom shell) and broad, gray carapace (top shell), which is heart-shaped and keeled (with ridged scales). There are 5 or more pairs of lateral scutes (plates) on the carapace and 4 pairs of pore-bearing inframarginal scutes (large scutes that connect the plastron and carapace) on the plastron. The triangular gray head has a hooked beak. The paddlelike limbs have 1 claw on the front flippers and 2 claws on the back flippers. Hatchlings are black on both sides.

Range: The Kemp's ridley ranges from Nova Scotia and Newfoundland south to Bermuda and west through the Gulf of Mexico. Nesting adults are usually concen-

trated in the Gulf of Mexico, while juvenile turtles may extend along the Atlantic coast of the United States. The species is infrequently observed on the shores of western Europe.

Reproduction: The turtles nest from April to June on beaches in Tamaulipas, Mexico. Occasionally, they nest on Padre Island, Texas. The adults mate offshore near the nesting area. When a strong or moderate north wind blows, the females land in large numbers on beaches with elevated dune areas backed by swamps. The females lay eggs during the day, 3 times a season, with a 10 to 28 day interval in between. Each clutch averages 110 eggs and incubation takes from 45 to 70 days. Females may nest every 1 to 3 years.

Reason for Decline: Kemp's ridley turtle populations have historically declined due to overharvesting for turtle products and eggs. They are also limited by deaths from oil spills, beach traffic, beach development and predation on nestlings. Boat propellers, which often inflict serious wounds to sea turtles, have been responsible for many turtle deaths. Commercial fishing and shrimping activities often cause turtles to drown or become mutilated or entangled in nets. Fortunately, federal regulations now require all shrimp trawlers in the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean to use turtle excluder devices (TEDs) year-round.

History in Connecticut: Although it is frequently thought of as a tropical turtle, the Kemp's ridley does wander north into Connecticut during the warmer months. Sea turtles have been documented in Long Island Sound since the early 1900s. In a recent New York study, the Kemp's ridley was found to be the most abundant species of sea turtle along the shores of New York.

Interesting Facts: In the past, Kemp's ridleys were often confused with loggerhead turtles; they are even known as Kemp's loggerheads. This species tends to

use shallower water for foraging in the summer than loggerheads.

This smallest of the sea turtles has other close relatives in the Pacific and Indian Oceans that are similar in appearance.

The Kemp's ridley is the only sea turtle that nests during the day.

Protective Legislation: *Federal* - Endangered Species Act of 1973, CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) Appendix I. *State* - Connecticut General Statutes Sec. 26-311.

What You Can Do: You can help sea turtles by not purchasing illegal turtle products, such as turtle leather and tortoiseshell items.

Many sea turtles are tagged for research with metal or plastic markers. Tags are usually on the inside edge of the front flippers; sometimes the rear flippers or the shell may be tagged. If you observe a tagged turtle, **do not remove** any tags unless the turtle is dead. Tag numbers should be reported to the address on the tag or to the Wildlife Division's Nonharvested Wildlife Program, 391 Route 32, North Franklin, CT 06254, (203)642-7239.