

Website offers glimpse of turtle hatchlings

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Waiting for sea turtle hatchlings to emerge from a nest can be a bit like scanning the skies for a shooting star.

It might not happen at all that night or take hours before those tiny flippers start shifting the grains, but at least now thousands of web viewers can sit back in the comfort of wherever they might be and wait until they do.

A new live web-streaming, solar-powered camera began recording turtle nests -- or mostly sand -- last week to give people the opportunity to see several species of baby sea turtles emerge from the beach at Canaveral National Seashore.

The project is a partnership between University of Central Florida graduate students and Canaveral rangers. It's an effort to expand the park's reach for people who can't necessarily visit it due to financial or physical limitations.

"It kind of gives you a window into a part of the nesting process that hardly anyone gets to see," said ranger Laura Henning, chief of interpretation and visitor services.

Canaveral broke a record with more than 5,000 nests this year from loggerhead, leatherback and green sea turtles.

Under the supervision of park staff, visitors who make reservations and pay a fee may -- in person -- watch loggerhead sea turtles nesting in the evening. Until now there hasn't been any program to watch hatchlings emerge, which generally happens when sand surface conditions are cool.

Emergences occur primarily at night, according to the Fish and Wildlife Research Institute, although it can also happen in the late afternoon and early morning.



This solar panel and infrared camera that sit atop a stand are making it possible for the public to view sea turtle hatchlings emerge from their nests in Canaveral National Seashore. N-J | Peter Bauer



Professor Phil Peters, left, gets help from Canaveral National Seashore rangers setting up a solar powered infrared camera stand Sept. 14 to monitor a sea turtle nest on the beach south of New Smyrna Beach. N-J | Peter Bauer

The infrared surveillance camera, which films in black and white, will run from dusk to dawn. Archived video isn't available yet, so folks will have to check often to catch a glimpse of hatchlings.

Rangers have a rough estimate of when the eggs will hatch and will be moving the cameras to different nests after the hatchlings come out, said Phil Peters, UCF professor of digital media.

"Now you may see sand," he said. "It is like looking for a shooting star, you are just waiting and hoping that you'll be the one to see the nest erupt with all these turtles."

There's also a chance viewers may see other creatures pass through the camera's view, such as raccoons or ghost crabs, which eat sea turtle eggs. During testing, students spotted a bobcat on the beach, Henning said.

Students in Peters' design for new media class were tasked with applying digital technology to the natural world.

"The sea turtles are very much a symbol of this park and we were saying, 'How can we show it to the rest of the country?' " Peters said.

A \$10,000 grant from the National Park Foundation, the charitable partner of the National Park Service, made the project possible.

The small group of students -- Brian Tortorelli, John Rife, Jonathon Friskics, Brian Mitchell, Brad Lewter, Alex Katsaros and Victor Randall -- have been working on the project for nearly a year.

Orlando resident Tortorelli, who hopes to become a college professor, said he's gotten to know the park well over the past few years, camping at the beach at night and learning about the sea turtle's life cycle.

In the past, he and students developed an interactive website for Canaveral with videos about the park experience.

"We wanted to immerse ourselves in the park so we could know how to create an immersive experience," said Tortorelli, 35, who designed the camera array and worked with Superior Metals in Orlando on welding the aluminum frame.

Beach Electric in New Smyrna Beach worked with the students on the wiring.

The camera's transmitter is rated for 15 miles to give rangers flexibility to move it from nest to nest.

The program will run through Nov. 1, though there are more plans in store for the camera's reach in between sea turtle nesting seasons.

Ranger Henning said the camera might also be aimed to film surf, migrating birds, or placed on a dock to film passing dolphins and manatees.

"We're just trying to expand the visitor experience for everyone," she said.

How to watch

The "Turtle Cam" will be streaming live video at night through Nov. 1. To access the video, go to <http://www.nps.gov/cana/photosmultimedia/> and click the play button. Send your comments and observations to canaveralturtlecam@gmail.com.

About loggerhead sea turtles

- Loggerhead sea turtles earned their name for their large heads, which may be 10 to 12 inches wide.
- Powerful jaw muscles allow the loggerhead to crush heavy-shelled clams, marine snails, horseshoe crabs and crustaceans.
- Loggerhead turtles reach maturity after 20 to 40 years and can live 70-plus years.
- Hatchlings are 2 inches long. Adults can grow to an average weight of 200 pounds.
- During nesting season, females stay in shallow areas near their nesting beaches.

SOURCE: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

About turtle hatchlings

- Sea turtles instinctively move to the brightest direction after emerging from a nest. On a natural beach, light is on the open horizon.
- Sea turtle eggs incubate for about two months before hatching.
- Females nest every two to three years and dig several nests to lay their eggs. After digging a hole, the turtle deposits about 80 to 120 eggs and then uses her flippers to move sand over the nest before returning to the sea.
- Sea turtles make between 40,000 to 84,000 nests annually on the Florida coast.

SOURCE: Fish and Wildlife Research Institute