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Ranger Ridley to the Rescue

A Texas Cairn Joins the Fight to Save a Rare Sea Turtle



Ridley looking for dolphins.
Photo: National Parks Service.



Ridley finds turtle eggs.
Photo: National Parks Service.



When he isn't working, Ridley enjoys swimming and barking at dolphins.
Photo: National Parks Service.

"They have so much personality," Shaver says. "They are stubborn, but they have all this character, and you love that."

Scottish highlanders used the tenacity, good nose, and go-to-ground instincts of the Cairn Terrier to locate and eradicate burrowing vermin. Cairns alerted their owners to the den with aggressive digging and barking. On Padre Island in Texas, a seven-year-old Cairn Terrier named Ridley uses these same instincts to help scientists save the world's most endangered sea turtle by sniffing out their elusive nests. When Ridley uncovers a nest, however, he digs gently and watches patiently while his owner recovers the precious eggs.

Ridley's owner is Donna Shaver, PhD, Chief of the Division of Sea Turtle Science and Recovery at Padre Island National Seashore, a unit of the National Parks Service (NPS). She started working with endangered sea turtles in Texas in

1980 and she has a special passion for the endangered Kemp's ridley.

The Kemp's ridley is the most vulnerable species of sea turtle. Once common in the Gulf of Mexico, human activity decimated their numbers to that point that many biologists felt the species was headed for extinction. By 1985, only 702 nests were identified world wide, almost all of them along a 16-mile stretch of Mexican beach.

To help save the Kemp's ridley, Shaver, her colleagues, and a large group of volunteers have dedicated decades to establishing a stable nesting ground on Padre Island. Although the Kemp's ridley is a native nester in Texas, by the 1980s biologists were only able to locate one nest every two to three years. Increasing

the number of nests required collecting and incubating the eggs to greatly improve the chances of survival.

Biologists and volunteers patrol the beaches during nesting season for signs of turtle tracks and a nest. Eggs are recovered and incubated at NPS headquarters, and hatchlings are released into the Gulf. For a highly endangered species like the Kemp's ridley, every recovered nest matters.

The problem is that Kemp's ridley nests are the most difficult sea turtle nests to locate. Unlike other sea turtles, Kemp's ridleys prefer laying their eggs under the stormiest of conditions. Sometimes, scientists are unable to find the nest because windblown sand has obliterated the tracks.



Ridley gently digs at a nest he discovered. Photo: National Parks Service.

Frustrated, Shaver considered using a dog to help locate the hidden nests. “I thought if dogs could find bombs and counterfeit CDs, why not turtle eggs?”

After researching many breeds, Shaver decided that Cairns would be perfect for hunting turtle eggs. She liked their good nose and go-to-ground instinct, as well as their small size and non-shedding coat. Ridley and his family were the first Cairns Shaver had ever met, and she was smitten.

“They have so much personality,” Shaver says. “They are stubborn, but they have all this character, and you love that.”

When he was still a puppy, Shaver trained Ridley to find turtle eggs using techniques similar to the ones Anne Dove describes in the nose work article on page 62. She started with food rewards in the house, then rewarded Ridley for finding nest cavities on the beach, and finally took Ridley out to find turtle eggs buried in the sand.

Ridley’s job is to find the hard nests, the ones that have been covered by blowing sand. Work conditions can be challenging. “Wind and blowing sand make it very hard for the dog to find the scent,” says Shaver. “It is much harder than the tests you see on TV.”

Ridley likes finding nests, and he tries very hard when the rangers ask for his help. He keeps working in extreme heat and driving winds, and sometimes Shaver makes him take a break. “He is my pet. I don’t want anything to happen to him,” she says.

One day Shaver forced Ridley to cool down in the car while the rangers and volunteers continued looking for a nest. Ridley spent his rest period standing and whining at the car window, anxious to rejoin the hunt. A few minutes after being released from the car, Ridley found the nest.

Like all good Cairns, Ridley is as soft in the heart as he is hard in the head. Ridley worries when a family member suffers even a minor injury, and he showed great concern while Shaver recovered from a painful back surgery. Shaver believes this strong connection to her is the reason he digs so gently when he finds a nest. “He knows how important it is to me,” she says. “He is very proud when he finds a nest. He likes to see the eggs as we recover them.”

The hard work is paying off. In the 32 years since Donna Shaver joined US and Mexican government efforts to save this

highly endangered species, the Kemp’s ridley has rebounded from “genetically extinct” to the point where biologists have started discussions on removing it from the endangered species list in a few years. On Padre Island, the number of found nests increased from 5 in 1996 to 50 in 2005 (the year Ridley was born). In 2012, a record 209 nests were recovered.

Shaver says it is impossible to quantify how many turtles have survived thanks to Ridley’s efforts, but she puts the number into the hundreds. She is certain that cars would have destroyed all of the eggs in at least one of Ridley’s nests, and predation or human activity would have significantly reduced the number of hatchlings from the others.

“Some people shy away from terriers because they are so stubborn,” Shaver says. “But if you have the patience to train them, they make great working dogs, and they love it. It is very rewarding.”

The Kemp’s ridley nesting season starts in April. Follow Ridley Ranger’s progress on his Facebook page: www.facebook.com/pages/Ridley-Ranger



Ridley likes watching Donna Shaver recover eggs from a nest he found. Photo: National Parks Service.