by Shelley Bueche

The Ridley Ranger

Searching for endangered sea turtles and their nests on the Padre Island National Seashore

"Find the nest," Dr. Donna Shaver directs Ridley, her Cairn Terrier, as he pounces into action on the sandy beaches of Padre Island. The national seashore of Padre Island is a 70-mile stretch of pristine undeveloped beach along the Gulf of Mexico on the southern tip of Texas.

Ridley's sniffing skills are called into action only after Shaver and her dedicated team have put in exhausting hours searching for the elusive nests of the most endangered and tiniest sea-turtle species, the Kemp's Ridley. "They are the smallest sea turtles and they leave small, faint tracks, often on windy days," Shaver says.

Ridley Ranger is Ridley's official registered name. He is the only dog in the United States trained to detect Kemp's Ridley nests and has successfully found the nests on the beach. According to the National Parks Service (NPS) with the U.S. Department of the Interior (Dr. Shaver's employer), the Kemp's Ridley's *(Lepidochelys kempii)* average length is 23 to 27½ inches, with an average weight of 80 to 100 pounds for an adult.

Dr. Donna Shaver and her turtle-sniffing Cairns, Kaleigh and Ridley

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The turtles are typically found in the Gulf of Mexico, but immature turtles have appeared as far away as New England and Nova Scotia. The Kemp's Ridley population had a serious decline in the mid-1990s, primarily due to overharvesting of eggs and overfishing of the adult turtles. Serendipity was involved when approximately 40,000 nesting Kemp's Ridley females were found in Mexico during a film shoot in 1947. In 1978, the United States and Mexico combined their conservation efforts and formed the Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle Recovery Project. The project headquarters for the U.S. portion of this effort is located at the Padre Island National Seashore.

Passion for Wildlife

In 1979, Donna Shaver was a student at Cornell University. She picked up a brochure describing wildlife-research opportunities on the beach in southern Texas and she packed her bags and headed south. "I became inter-

ested in working with animals as a child," Shaver says. "My grandfather fed squirrels and other wildlife and instilled in me a love of animals and wildlife." Shaver wasn't sure exactly where her interests would lead her, but she knew she wanted to work with endangered animals in conservation research.

Shaver arrived at the beaches of Padre Island and immediately decided this was where she would spend the rest of her life. She started as a volunteer with the NPS in 1980, became a seasonal employee in 1981, and became a full-time permanent employee in 1985. During this time, she also went back to school and received a Ph.D. in zoology from A&M University. Shaver is now the director of sea-turtle science and recovery with NPS in Padre Island. As a demonstration of her commitment, Shaver has turned down a number of employment opportunities that would have taken her away from her abiding passion: saving the Kemp's Ridley from extinction.

Ridley Reporting for Duty

Shaver asked her fiancé and fellow sea-turtle volunteer, Stephen Kurtz, if dogs are trained to detect melanoma, bombs in airports, search for missing persons, and other highly precise duties, why can't they help search for hard-to-find nests of the Kemp's Ridley sea turtle? Although Kurtz hadn't grown up with dogs, he was extremely intrigued by the idea. "We wanted a Cairn Terrier," Shaver says. "They have a very good nose and an independent spirit."

Shaver and Kurtz got Ridley Ranger in Corpus Christi, Texas. Immediately they began training Ridley at home to see if he could join them in Kemp's Ridley nest detection on the island. "We hid treats around the house and turned them [now there is a second Cairn terrier in the household, Kayleigh] loose to find them using their noses," Kurtz says. Kaleigh is still in training but occasionally accompanies Ridley on beach nest-finding expeditions.

"The treats are not in sight, so they must sniff them out. We reinforced the *use your nose* training when they seem to be looking more than sniffing," Kurtz says. Ridley takes his work on the beach very seriously and seems to have an almost intuitive sense of the sensitive work he is performing. Although Ridley and Kayleigh spend a lot of time in training when they are home, they do not work together in detection work on the beach, as they can be prone to distract each other.

When Ridley is outfitted with his green harness and jumps into the Jeep Cherokee, he is all business and ready to go to work. On the beach, when Ridley sniffs for the nests, he detects a distinct smell composed of a mucus-like fluid that coats the eggs. Once the nest and eggs are found, the eggs are gently removed and taken to the incubation facility until they are fully hatched and ready to be released into the gulf.

Padre Island National Seashore
nps.gov/pais/
361-949-8068
Hatchling Hotline:
361-949-7163
YouTube video of Shaver and Ridley working on the beach, posted by Texas Parks and Wildlife Department:
youtube.com/watch?v=afgsYchpD_Q

Back at the Incubation Facility

The incubation facility for Kemp's Ridley eggs is located at the NPS turtle lab at Padre Island National Seashore. The facility holds several hundred boxes on three levels of wooden shelves. There are Styrofoam coolers modified to hold the fragile eggs packed with sand from their original nest. Each clutch of eggs is hooked into a temperature monitor to ensure the correct hatching temperature and ultimate release into the ocean. Once the hatchlings emerge from their nest, they then rest for a period. When they are ready to go, they enter an active state called "frenzy." In the wild, this is when they would make a mad dash for the surf. In the facility, this is an indication that the hatchlings are ready for release.

Public releases of Kemp's Ridley hatchlings on the beach at Padre Island National Seashore are announced and well attended by staff, members of the media, and plenty of visitors. The release takes place around 6:30A.M. amid cheers from the crowd. Shaver releases the hatchlings about 25 feet back from the ocean to emulate the trek they would be taking in the wild. "They come from all over the country to experience the releases," Kurtz says. "It is a lot of fun and a very emotional experience for some. It is not unusual to see tears streaming down the cheek of visitors as they watch the hatchlings begin what is sure to be a very rough journey."

Once the hatchlings reach the water, they swim at a furious pace for up to 48 hours until they are settled in the drift of the water. At this point, Shaver, Kurtz, and the rest of the staff and volunteers take a deep breath and exhale while hoping for the best.

Ridley is part of an extraordinary conservation effort toward ensuring the continuation of the most endangered sea turtle of them all.

Author's note: As of early August, the surface oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico has become difficult to detect, and no oil from the spill has been documented at Padre Island National Seashore. All of the Kemp's Ridley hatchlings from Texas nests will have been released by mid-August and it is projected that the oil spill will remain away from the Texas coastline through that time. Shaver has been part of national consultations with government officials on how to manage sea turtles in light of this devastating spill.

Shelley Bueche is a canine journalist in Austin, Texas. She and her family share their home with four dogs. They enjoy scouting out local dog-friendly parks and other venues in their spare time.