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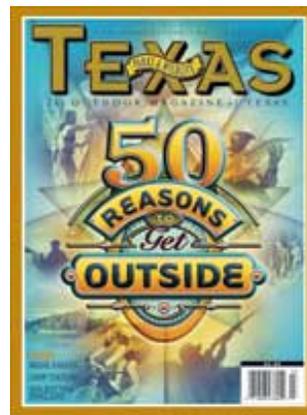
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Hatching Hope

A record 51 Kemp's ridley turtle nests were found along the Texas coast last year, but the species still faces an uphill climb.

By Melissa Gaskill



In front of a knot of early risers gathered on Padre Island National Seashore, park rangers carefully lifted dozens of baby sea turtles from boxes and set them down on the sand, facing the surf. Using the rising sun as a beacon, the inch-long hatchlings scuttled to catch a wave, flippers churning like tiny propellers when they did.

This scene was repeated 51 times last summer, as a total of 3,501 Kemp's ridley turtle hatchlings made their carefully supervised journey into the Gulf. That's impressive considering that in 1978, the species was down to fewer than 800 females nesting primarily on Playa de Rancho Nuevo, a 16-mile stretch of sand in northern Mexico. Biologists recognized that additional nesting sites would improve the critically endangered species' chances, and so launched the multiagency, binational Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle Restoration and Enhancement Program. For the next 10 years, roughly 2,000 eggs were collected each year from Rancho Nuevo and incubated in boxes of sand from North Padre Island, where the

turtles were known to have nested decades before, reports Donna Shaver, chief of the division of sea turtle science and recovery at the national seashore. Hatchlings were released each year on the seashore's beaches, in hopes they would imprint on the location and then raised in captivity for another year before final release in waters off Texas and Florida. In 1996, two of those island-born turtles returned to lay eggs. Shaver says it's possible that others returned earlier, but couldn't be positively identified because their metal flipper tags had fallen off. In 1983, the project switched to more durable "living tags," small plugs of lighter bottom shell implanted into the upper shell.

Kemp's ridleys take 10 to 15 years to mature, and even in natural conditions, their odds of reaching adulthood may be only 1 in 1,000. "We hope we improve those odds by finding the nests and protecting the hatchlings," Shaver says, at least until they reach the sea. Eggs are still incubated in protected areas, but now untagged hatchlings are released immediately.

The 51 nests found along the Texas coast in 2005 marked a record high that broke previous records of 42 nests in 2004 and 38 in 2002. At Rancho Nuevo, where an estimated 40,000 turtles nested in a single day in 1947, the count has risen from a low of 702 in 1985 to 10,099 in 2005. Some 15,000 adult Kemp's ridleys and an unknown number of juveniles now roam the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico. It is an impressive recovery, but the species still faces an uphill climb. Development on nesting beaches, harvesting of the eggs, slaughter of mature turtles for food and incidental capture by commercial fishing operations continue to threaten the turtles.

Ridleys come ashore to nest from April through July, usually during the day. Beachgoers can help recovery efforts by watching for nesting females and calling the turtle hotline, at 1-866-TURTLE5, immediately when one is spotted. Observers should stay back until the mother has finished laying her eggs and covered the nest, which can take 45 minutes. Hatchling releases at the National Seashore, between June and August, are free and open to the public. Call the hatchling hotline at (361) 949-7163. Purchase of a \$10 Adopt a Turtle packet financially supports restoration efforts. Properly disposing of trash and picking up litter on the beach

also helps the turtles. For more information, visit <[www. nps.gov/pais](http://www.nps.gov/pais)>.

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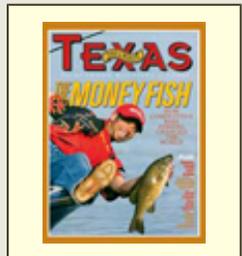
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