

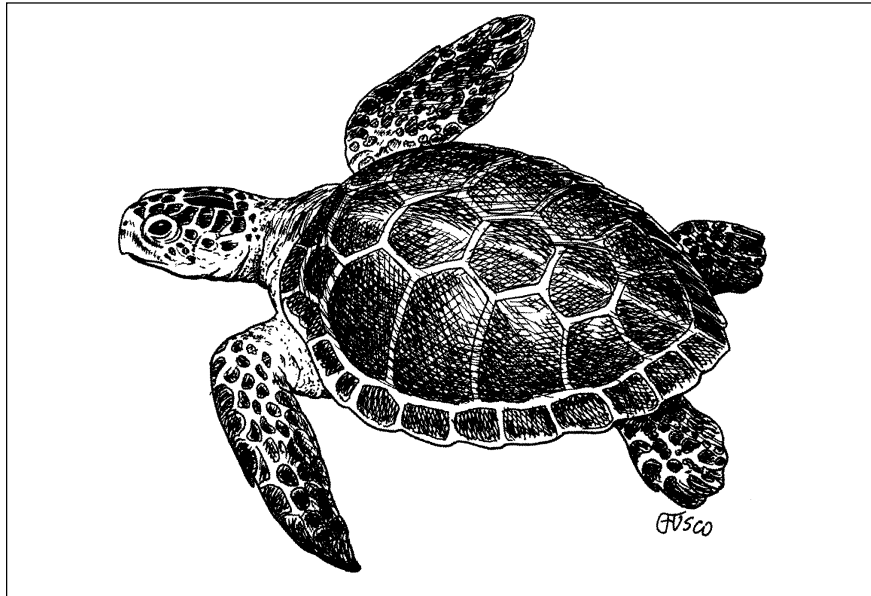
WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

ENDANGERED AND THREATENED SPECIES SERIES

LOGGERHEAD SEA TURTLE

Caretta caretta

THREATENED



Habitat: Open ocean and estuaries.

Weight: 170-350 pounds. Weights of up to 1,000 pounds have been recorded.

Length: 31-45 inches.

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

Food: Jellyfish, sponges, shellfish, shrimp, squid, barnacles, sea urchins and occasionally seaweed.

Status: Federally and state threatened.

Identification: The loggerhead is readily identified by its reddish brown coloration and broad head. Young turtles are brown with light margins below. The front and back flippers have 2 claws. The carapace (top shell) has 5 lateral scutes (plates) and the plastron (bottom shell) has 3 inframarginal scutes (large scutes that connect the plastron and carapace) without pores.

Range: The loggerhead ranges through the North and South Atlantic, occasionally entering the Mediterranean Sea, from Newfoundland to the British Isles, and south to Argentina, the Canary Islands and the western coast of tropical Africa. The turtle formerly nested on Atlantic

beaches from Virginia to the Gulf Coast; today the breeding range extends from North Carolina to the east and west coasts of Florida. Nesting also occurs on some beaches and bays in the Caribbean.

Reproduction: Loggerheads mate in offshore waters near beach nesting areas. The females come onto the beaches at night, digging their nests above the high-tide mark. Some females make "false crawl" attempts where they come ashore but do not nest. The reasons for this are unknown. The clutch size is 35 to 108 ping-pong ball-sized eggs, and the incubation period ranges from 46 to 65 days. The females usually produce 2 to 3

clutches per season. They are sexually mature at 6 to 7 years of age, and they nest every second or third year.

Reason for Decline: Sea turtle populations have historically declined due to overharvesting for food and turtle products. They are also limited by deaths from oil spills, beach traffic, predation and nest flooding. 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, by 1994, federal regulations will require that all shrimp trawlers in the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean use turtle excluder devices (TEDs) year round.

Discarded plastic bags and wrappers, helium balloons and monofilament fishing line that end up in the ocean can also be deadly to sea turtles, as well as to other marine life. Balloons and plastic bags, when floating in water, resemble the turtles' main prey, jellyfish. When turtles mistakenly eat these items or fishing line, their digestive system becomes blocked and they eventually die. Another factor which affects sea turtle populations is the presence of lights on beach nesting areas. After hatching, the small hatchlings head for the light along the horizon and light reflected off the surface of the ocean. Inland lights can confuse their orientation, causing the hatchlings to head inland rather than out to sea.

Nesting areas on Atlantic beaches are threatened by recreational and industrial development and beachfront construction.

History in Connecticut: The loggerhead has rarely been seen or documented in Connecticut waters. However, cold-stunned turtles have been reported on the north shore of Long Island.

Interesting Facts: The loggerhead is thought to be the largest living hard-shelled turtle. It is exceeded in length and weight only by the leatherback sea turtle.

The skull of the loggerhead is broad and massive, providing an anchor for the strong jaw muscles that are needed to crush shellfish.

The loggerhead is the only living species in the genus *Caretta*.

Studies have shown that loggerhead eggs incubated at about 90 degrees F (32 degrees C) or higher develop into females. Eggs incubated at 82 degrees F (28 degrees C) or below produce males. Incubation temperatures between the two result in both males and females.

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

What You Can Do: You can help sea turtles by not purchasing illegal turtle products, such as turtle leather and tortoiseshell items, and by properly disposing of or recycling plastic bags, fishing line and balloons. In an effort to help curb the problem of balloons in Long Island Sound, Connecticut has passed legislation limiting helium balloon releases to no more than 9 in a 24-hour period. With the help of a little wind, even balloons released in Connecticut's inland areas can end up in the Sound.

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.