



ON SEA TURTLE PATROL

BY NANCY DAWSON

"LAST CALL, CALLIE!" Gram jangles her keys as she heads out to the carport.

"Coming!" I yell, tossing off the covers. Outside my window the sky is awash with a predawn glow.

The trouble with tracking sea turtles is you have to get up early, every day. Today is my twenty-fifth day on patrol, which Gram says is probably a record for a twelve-year-old.

When Dad dropped me off at Gram's here in Florida two days after school got out, who knew I would morph from a Cincinnati city kid into a turtle-obsessed beach volunteer? If I'm not out on the beach, I'm watching turtle videos or reading turtle books.

I pull on cargo shorts and my blue T-shirt, the one with baby turtles scrambling up the front and over the shoulders. I grab a banana off the kitchen counter and rush outside.

BY THE TIME Gram and I get to the beach, the sky glows pale yellow, with the sun peeking up over the edge of the horizon. I breathe in the salty air and lick the tangy taste off my lips. I stuff my flip-flops into my pockets and dig my toes into the white sand.

We walk along the water's edge, looking for fresh turtle tracks, which scientists call "crawls." The beachfront is lined with high-rise condos and hotels, but at this early hour no one's out except two joggers running at the edge of the

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surf. A noisy pack of brown pelicans is fighting over the carcass of a dead fish tangled in seaweed. The only other sound is the *whoosh, whoosh* of the waves rolling in and out.

“Fresh crawl!” I call out, proud to see turtle tracks before Gram does. The crawl emerges straight out of the ocean, two long lines of depressions in the sand dug out by the turtle’s flippers.

“What kind of turtle? Which direction?” Gram demands.

I study the turtle crawl photos at the back of the clipboard before saying, “Loggerhead, incoming?” Loggerheads are the most common turtle on this stretch of Florida’s Gulf Coast. I hold my breath and wait for Gram’s verdict.

“Good call, Callie,” she says. She records the nest location, date, and time on her clipboard. She frowns down at the sand. “Where’s the outgoing crawl?”

I examine the sand. No outgoing crawl, which should be near the incoming tracks or even on top of them. Turtles can sometimes be disoriented by the bright lights of condos and hotels near the beach. Did this mama turtle lose her way?

Gram stuffs her clipboard into her backpack. “Come on, Callie, let’s follow her tracks.”

The crawl leads us above the high tide line, where the sand is dry and loose. Seagrass tickles my bare legs as we follow the tracks up the face of a sand dune. We reach the top of the dune, where I see . . .

A turtle! She’s lying in a slight depression in the sand, motionless. Her eyes are wide open, glassy-brown and rimmed with salt crystals.



“Is she OK?” I ask Gram.

“I hope so. She’s probably resting between bouts of digging out her egg chamber,” Gram says. “Keep watching.”

I do, but the turtle just lies there. She’s about three feet long and has the large head and big, blunt jaws of a loggerhead. Her shell, flippers, and head are covered in a maze of reddish-brown geometric shapes, each outlined by thin white lines. Patches of green algae and gray barnacles cling to her shell.

“Gram, look! She’s moving her back flippers.” The turtle pushes her hind flippers like alternating paddles, scooping out sand from beneath her rear end. She digs and rests, digs and rests.

To lay her eggs, she has to dig a nest chamber two feet deep. And she’s taking for-

I WOULD LOVE TO HAVE
SEA TURTLES COME TO ...
OUR BEACHES!



I WONDER HOW THEY
DECIDE WHICH BEACHES
TO NEST ON.



ever! By now the sun is full up. I know the turtle is in a trance, unaware of us or anything happening around her until she is done nesting. But still, we have to keep her safe.

“Look! Eggs!” Gram says, pulling my attention back to the turtle. Her stubby tail moves to one side as she pushes out round, white eggs, each the size of a Ping-Pong ball. Clear, gloppy liquid slides off the eggs as they drop down into the nest chamber.

“Wow!” I whisper. I feel like I’m starring in a TV nature show. Only the turtle is the real star.

“Sea turtles have been coming ashore to lay their eggs for millions of years, all over the earth,” Gram says, her voice filled with awe.

The turtle is still pushing out eggs, one by one. She’ll lay about 120 before she’s done. Then she’ll return to the sea.

If she makes it back across the beach. Nighttime is turtle time, but someone forgot to tell this turtle. What if she’s confused by the daylight and can’t find the ocean? What if she ends up in a hotel parking lot and gets squashed by a car?

My stomach knots up and my brain is stuck on terrible turtle troubles. What can we do?

Gram’s on her phone, recruiting other volunteers to come to our location, quick. “We’ll try to help her get back to her ocean home,” she says to me. “After that, it’s up to her.”

The turtle’s just lying there again. I wonder if she’s sick or injured. But then she flips sand into the air and scoots her body around to pack

it down over the nest hole. She scatters loose sand on top to hide her nest from marauding raccoons and stray dogs. Then she turns and crawls toward the sea, never looking back.

We're on the move, too.

"Callie, you patrol the left side, keeping ten feet away and behind her. I'll take the right side. We need to keep people away from her and off her incoming tracks, which she'll follow back to the sea."

My side of the beach is empty except for a flock of shorebirds down by the water's edge. They're pecking in the wet sand, hunting for insects and other tasty snacks. Each wave chases them to drier ground. As soon as the wave pulls out, they're back.

I turn away from the birds and watch the turtle. One flipper-step at a time, she slowly drags her 300-pound body forward. No wonder female loggerheads come on land only four or five times a summer to lay eggs. They spend the rest of their lives gracefully swimming around in the ocean.

Gram points to two men jogging at the edge of the waves. "Stay with the turtle while I go talk to those guys," she says.

AFTER SHE GOES I hear a yell down near the water. "Whooo-eee!" From the top of the dune, I spot two guys on bikes doing wheelies in the surf. They're headed straight for the turtle tracks.

I start running, but my feet can't get much traction on the loose sand. I'm moving, well, as slow as a turtle. When I get to the

wet sand, the running is easier. "Stop!" I yell, flinging my arms out like a traffic cop.

"Who appointed you beach police?" a guy with black, spiky hair demands. He's a foot taller than I am, and older, probably in high school. His buddy closes in from the left.

I clear my throat and think back to my volunteer training: *Introduce yourself. Turn bystanders into allies.*

"I'm Callie. I'm not the beach police, but I am a trained turtle volunteer. We have a stranded sea turtle. Can you help?"

"Definitely!" the buddy says. "I'm Eric." He points to the spiky-haired guy. "That's Tyler. Last year in biology we adopted a turtle nest. We got to go dig it up three days after the turtles busted out and we took inventory by counting the number of hatched eggs."

I am so jealous, but all I say is, "Great!"

Eric scans the beach. "Turtle!" he whoops, pointing.

The turtle flops over the top of the sand dune and skids down its steep front. Then she waddles forward, pulling herself with her flippers.

A group of adults with three little kids in tow stream out of a condo. They're carrying fold-up chairs and an umbrella and dragging a cooler. I have to stop them before they trample the turtle tracks. I slap on my Save the Turtles visor, hoping it makes me look older and more official.

"I'm going to go talk to those people," I tell Eric and Tyler. "You guys please patrol along this side of the tracks. Anyone who





GO, BABY, GO!



A turtle crawl—incoming and outgoing



A new nest with freshly laid eggs

hungry predators such as sand crabs, seagulls, and frigate birds.

Once in the water, the tiny turtles swim for days until they reach floating masses of seaweed. They will hide out in the seaweed for years, eating tiny shrimp and other organisms. Each loggerhead turtle lives alone, never knowing its nest mates or parents.

After about thirty years at sea, a female loggerhead turtle returns to the beach where she herself was hatched (or to one nearby) to dig her first nest. How often she nests and how many eggs she lays depends on where she nests around the world. In Florida, a mama loggerhead nests every two or three years, laying about 120 eggs per nest. She nests four or more

After about fifty-six days underground, loggerhead sea turtle eggs hatch. The hatchlings pile on top of each other, working as a team to dig out of the nest. The turtles on top loosen the sand overhead with their front flippers, while the ones on the

bottom rock their bodies back and forth to pack the trickling sand down, slowly raising the floor of the nest until the turtles on top pop out. Then all the two-inch-long turtles make a frenzied scramble to the sea, usually under the cover of darkness to elude

comes along, ask them to stay ten feet back from the turtle and off her tracks.”

I run over to the approaching people and tell them about the sea turtle. They’re tourists from Iowa and really excited by the chance to see a turtle. They pile their equipment in a heap and follow me.

Eric and Tyler are standing guard beside the crawl, scanning the beach and watching the turtle’s slow progress. I spread the Iowa people out in a line next to them.

Gram and the joggers are lined up along the other side of the tracks. Some sea turtle

volunteers have arrived and are working both sides, all in their official lime green “Sea Turtle Volunteer” T-shirts. I so want one of those T-shirts, but I can’t have one until I’m eighteen, old enough to be an official volunteer.

A crowd attracts a crowd, that’s what Gram always says. Suddenly we have about twenty or thirty people on each side of the tracks. They hold out their phones and take pictures of the turtle, of themselves, of the volunteers, and of me.

A woman stands apart, her eyes focused on the turtle. With her arms, she beckons the





Newly hatched and heading out to sea!

times a season, which is April through September. That's enough eggs to fuel a turtle population explosion, except that few survive to become parents themselves. Lucky loggerheads might live to be fifty.

In the United States, loggerheads nest on beaches in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, South and North Carolina, and Virginia.

Worldwide, the largest number of loggerheads nest on beaches in Oman on the Indian Ocean.

All sea turtles face numerous hazards: strangling in fishing lines and nets at sea, swallowing plastic bags that look like jellyfish to them, being hunted for their meat and eggs in some parts of the world, loss of beach habitat, and artificial lighting from hotels

and houses that draws mothers and babies away from the sea.

Along with the other six species of sea turtles—green, leatherback, hawksbill, Kemp's ridley, olive ridley, and flatback—loggerheads are listed as threatened with extinction under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

turtle forward, as though to say: *Come on, you can do it!*

And she can. I think. Only fifteen feet to go before the turtle will meet the edge of the incoming waves. All the official turtle volunteers are down by the water now, so I go there, too.

With a final thrust, the turtle meets an incoming wave. Water pours over her body. But then the wave whooshes out, leaving the turtle stranded in the wet sand. I want to run to her and push her forward, but I know not to. The volunteers spread

out their arms to keep people back, so I do, too.

Another wave washes over the turtle, and then another, and then she is floating free. She glides under the water and is gone.

Everyone cheers and claps. A little kid yells, "Bye-bye turtle!" Strangers hug and cry, and I find my own cheeks are wet.

Gram puts an arm around my shoulders. "Good job, Callie. I'm proud of you." We stand there, Gram and me, staring out at the infinite ocean.

My Best Turtle Patrol Day. Ever! 