

## U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Alligator River/Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge

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## News Release

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### Pea Island Website Features Video Footage of 2007 Sea Turtle Hatchlings



Volunteers patrol the entire refuge beach early mornings from May through September in search of the crawls left by female sea turtles as they drag themselves ashore to lay their eggs.

Photo Credit: Ron Marchand



Lights cause sea turtles to become disoriented and wander into dangerous areas. So, Volunteer Ron Marchand purchased special infrared photographic equipment to capture the infamous "turtle boil". You may view the footage at <http://www.fws.gov/peaisland/st.html>

Photo Credit: Ron Marchand

The summer of 2007 will go down in "sea turtle" history on Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge - at least for recent history. Of 14 identified nests laid on Pea Island beaches, an amazing 1390 hatchling sea turtles were successful in emerging from the nest and making their way to the Atlantic Ocean. This was a hatching success rate of 85% overall - an incredibly high success rate due primarily to the fact that all 14 nests hatched. The sea turtle nesting program on Pea Island is supported by a huge cadre of dedicated and dependable refuge volunteers. During the 2007 season, Ron Marchand, a very active "Turtle Watch" volunteer, was persistent enough to capture much of the action on video using infrared photographic equipment. Several clips are available for public viewing on the Pea Island web site at <http://www.fws.gov/peaisland/st.html>.

All species of sea turtles are considered to be either Endangered or Threatened and are protected under the Endangered Species Act. In most sea turtle nesting areas, major efforts are expended on protecting the nests and hatchlings. The labor force for most of these efforts is provided by volunteers. Sometimes their efforts really pay off. Other times, throughout the range of the turtles, due to storms, draught, high tides, predation, vandalism, or other uncontrollable forces or events, a large percentage of the eggs do not hatch. There has been little research conducted that provides answers to many of the questions about the life and death of sea turtles. Some years there is an abundance of nests and turtles; other years the turtles themselves seem to have disappeared.

Refuge Biologist Kris Fair dubbed 2007 the "year of the turtle" on Pea Island Refuge when she announced the initial results of the season at the annual volunteer awards ceremony. "I've worked with sea turtles for a long time," Fair commented, "and I've never seen a season with this successful a hatch rate." Of the 14 nests on the refuge, 13 were loggerhead and one was a green. In addition to the 14 nests, there were at least 17 "false crawls" - places where it was obvious a turtle came ashore but no evidence was found to document that eggs were actually laid. Fair explained, "A false crawl can result from a lot of situations. Maybe the turtle didn't like the texture of the sand, maybe there were too many shells, maybe something scared her off before she started to lay, or maybe she just changed her mind... there's really no way to know."

Senior Wildlife Biologist Dennis Stewart has worked with the Pea Island sea turtles since 1994 and remembers a summer with 37 nests.... "But, it's been a long time since we've seen numbers like that. One summer, we had only one nest," he said.

Compared to other sea turtle nesting areas further south, Pea Island's hatchling production would seem insignificant to the casual observer. Many beaches have hundreds, even thousands of sea turtle nests which produce hatchlings in numbers vastly larger than the Pea Island production. However, it is possible that Pea Island's turtles play a major role despite their small numbers. Because the gender of sea turtles is determined by the temperature at which the nest is incubated and Pea Island's nests are on the norther edge of the nesting range - this tiny refuge beach could be providing a significant proportion of the males to service the entire population of female loggerhead sea turtles. Fair added, "There's not enough research for us to know any of this for sure... but we do know that cooler temperatures produce male turtles...."

Marchand has been watching refuge sea turtle nests for six seasons. "In six years, I've counted a total of 49 turtles emerging from nests," he said, "but in the 2007 season, I personally escorted over 600 baby turtles to the ocean. It was a winning season for sea turtles!".

Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge offers two volunteer programs that support sea turtles. Turtle Patrol begins in May and runs through Labor Day. Volunteers are trained and tested in the use of a refuge 4-wheeler. The entire length of the refuge beach is patrolled by volunteers at daybreak each morning looking for the tell-tale crawl of the female turtle. This is a specialized program that has strict requirements to ensure the safety of the patrollers and the well-being of the turtles. Turtle Watch begins 50 days after the first turtle nest was laid. Turtle Watch volunteers report to the refuge beach in early evening and "nest sit" until midnight. Detailed training and specific time commitments are required for both programs. For more information, contact Kris Fair at 252-473-1744 or [kristina\\_fair@fws.gov](mailto:kristina_fair@fws.gov).