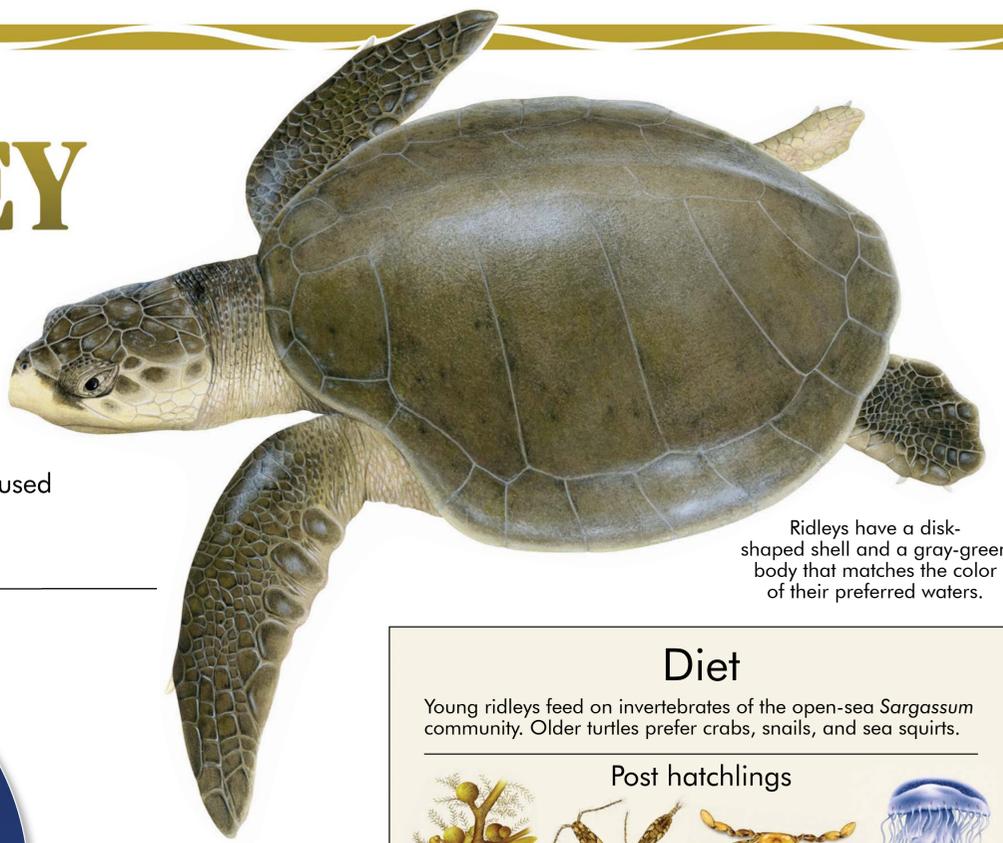


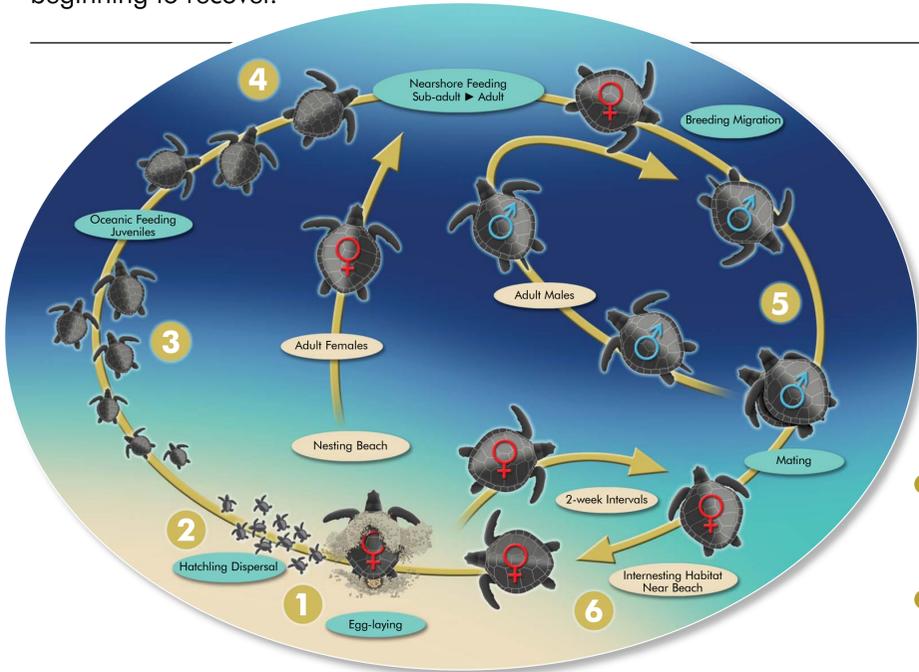
# KEMP'S RIDLEY TURTLE

*Lepidochelys kempii*

This rarest sea turtle is unique to the western North Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico. As late as the mid 1900s, Kemp's ridleys were abundant. On a single beach in Mexico, visitors recorded more than 40,000 turtles nesting together in one event. A few decades later, human threats had caused the population to crash. With conservation efforts, this sea turtle is now beginning to recover.



Ridleys have a disk-shaped shell and a gray-green body that matches the color of their preferred waters.



**Nesting/hatching season:** April–September  
**Adult shell length:** 23–26 in (58–66 cm)  
**Adult weight:** 70–108 lb (32–49 kg)  
**Age at maturity:** 10–17 years  
**Status:** Endangered



## Life Cycle

The life of a Kemp's ridley spans many habitats and several life stages.

- 1 Nests average 100 eggs which incubate under sand for 45–58 days. Warmer sands produce mostly female turtles and cooler sands result in mostly males.
- 2 A few days after they hatch, the hatchlings emerge together from the nest at night, scramble quickly to the sea, and are dispersed by ocean currents.
- 3 Juveniles live near the surface of the open sea and are carried by currents.
- 4 At about two years of age, juveniles swim into nearshore waters to inhabit shallow estuaries and other nearshore habitats. Sub-adults nearing maturity move into the Gulf of Mexico.
- 5 Adults mate along migration routes or near nesting areas.
- 6 Every 1–3 years, adult females migrate to the beach where they hatched and make about 2–3 nests at 14–28 day intervals. Most nesting takes place in synchronized arrivals (*arribadas*).

## Diet

Young ridleys feed on invertebrates of the open-sea *Sargassum* community. Older turtles prefer crabs, snails, and sea squirts.

### Post hatchlings



### Juveniles and Adults



## Natural Predators

Although eggs and small Kemp's ridleys have many natural predators, the largest ridleys have few.

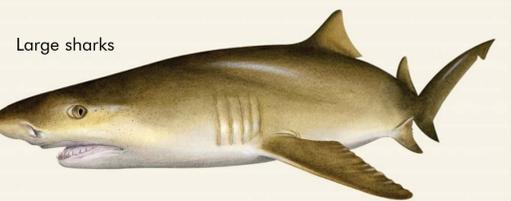
### Eggs and Hatchlings



### Post Hatchlings

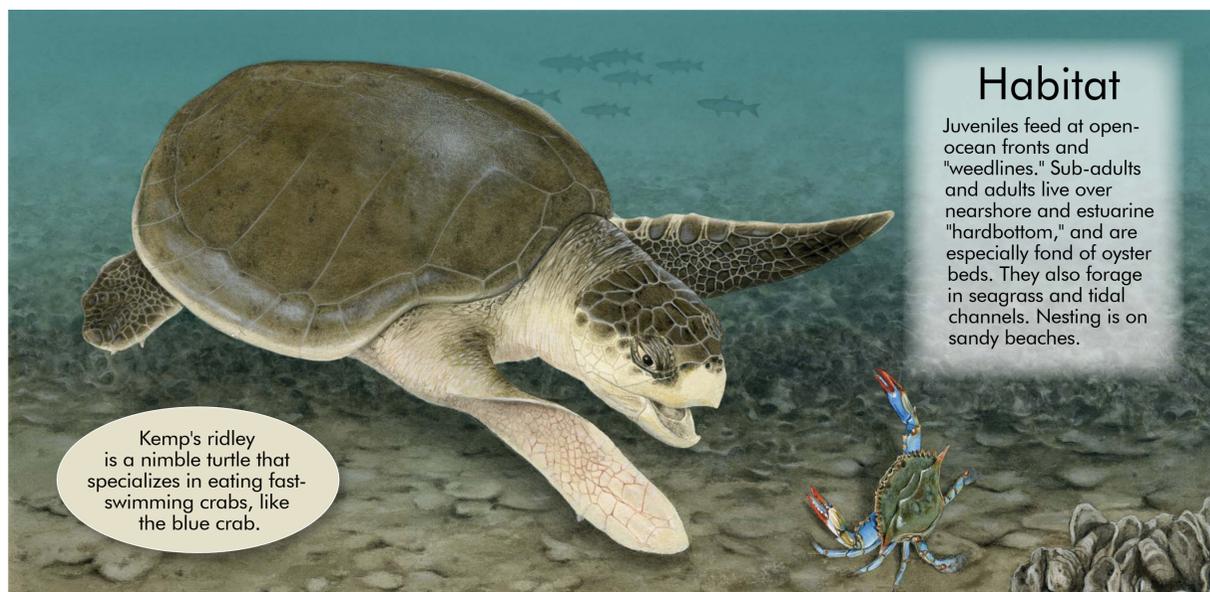


### Juveniles and Adults



## Habitat

Juveniles feed at open-ocean fronts and "weedlines." Sub-adults and adults live over nearshore and estuarine "hardbottom," and are especially fond of oyster beds. They also forage in seagrass and tidal channels. Nesting is on sandy beaches.



Kemp's ridley is a nimble turtle that specializes in eating fast-swimming crabs, like the blue crab.

## Conservation

Key efforts in saving Kemp's ridley from extinction have been the protection of their nesting beaches from egg poaching, and the use of Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs) in trawl nets. With a TED installed, most turtles caught in a trawl can escape without drowning.



## Nesting

Nesting takes place on windy days in synchronized mass *arribadas*. Each turtle takes 45 minutes, but the event may last many hours.



## Tracks

Alternating rear-flipper swirls are at the margin of a wavy track center with no taildrag mark.



## Distribution

Principal nesting beaches are in northern Mexico, although nesting is increasing in Texas. Florida gets a few nests each year. Juveniles are in open waters and older turtles are near shore. Most Kemp's ridleys inhabit the Gulf of Mexico, but in summer, some occur as far north as New England.



- Blue square: Oceanic juveniles
- Light blue square: Large juveniles and adults
- Red square: Major nesting beaches

## Threats

**Marine plastics** escape from land and are dumped at sea. Much of this persistent debris resembles food to turtles and presents a fatal ingestion hazard, especially to young turtles.

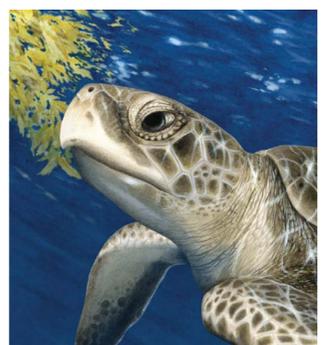


Other important threats:

- **Trawl nets without TEDs** drown turtles
- **Egg Poaching** removes eggs from the beach
- **Gill Nets** capture and drown turtles
- **Fishing Debris** entangles and drowns turtles
- **Boat Strikes** kill and injure turtles

## How to Help

Although Kemp's ridleys travel widely in North American waters and need help throughout their range if they are to survive, there are many things we can do for them here at home. Make informed seafood choices, pick up marine litter, avoid using plastic bags, boat slowly with vigilance through shallow sea turtle habitat, contribute to marine conservation organizations, purchase a sea turtle license plate, and share your interest in sea turtles with others.



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