

# Sand, Surf and Wildlife

By NACA Member Alan Kleinfeld

You might suspect a small beach town to be laid back, chilled out and generally relaxed. And although this coastal community of about 2,400 residents is definitely in a flip-flop-wearing frame of mind, our Public Safety Department (which includes an animal control officer) has its share of wild service calls.

We have the typical animal calls: barking canines, dogs off leash, and maybe a wayward bat or alligator now and again, but being a beach town, we also have routine calls ranging from “a seagull hopping around on one leg,” to “I think I just saw a shark.”

More than that, we have the occasional stranded dolphin or stingray. However, between May and August, one of our more routine calls is about turtles. Sea turtles, in general, and specifically the Loggerhead. These cold-blooded creatures don't hold up gas stations at gunpoint or park their SUVs on the dunes. They simply do what turtles do: lay eggs. Because the Loggerhead (the South Carolina State Reptile) is a threatened animal under the Endangered Species Act, Folly Beach Public Safety helps enforce the ordinances that help protect

these gentle animals.

Probably the most common turtle-related call is merely a sighting. Dispatch will get these on a regular basis. Momma Loggerheads are huge, weighing in around 350 lbs. on average, and coming across one on the beach can be startling, especially since they come ashore mostly at night. The best thing to do? Leave them alone.

When officers respond, it's to keep people way, make sure the turtles stay in the dark and are left to do what their instincts tell them to do.

During regular daytime beach patrol, officers inspect the turtle nests, easily identified by the wooden stakes with orange tape and orange signs that indicate it is a nesting area and protected by law. Officers also help enforce the “No Lights” ordinance along the beach, which says from May 1



through October 31, lights must be off from 10 p.m. to dawn.

In a nutshell, turtle hatchlings sense a drop in temperature and make their way out of the nests at night. Not only does nightfall make it harder for predators to find the tiny creatures, but there's less chance of dehydration. They instinctively use the light of the moon and start to navigate their way to the ocean. So if outdoor lights are on, it can send them in the wrong direction, which almost always spells certain death. Once in the water, the Loggerhead will never come on land again, unless it's a female laying eggs.

There are a few other small things officers try to do to assist the turtles, such as keeping pets off the beach during prohibited summer hours, asking visitors to remove all of their belongings from the beach, and reminding folks to fill in holes they may have dug.

For people who feel they must do something when they spot a turtle or turtle tracks, we ask them to call the non-emergency number at Public Safety. All summer long, the ACO is in contact with Folly's Turtle Watch Program, a group of volunteers who work in conjunction with the State Department of Natural Resources to monitor and track turtle activity.

Members of the Folly Turtle Watch go through special training to learn how to handle nests and hatchlings. Visit their Web site, [www.follyturtles.com](http://www.follyturtles.com), to discover a ton of info, like how many nests Folly saw this past summer and the results of the last inventory of eggs (a process wherein the Turtle Watch unearths a nest to count the hatched eggs and to which the public is invited to witness).

These volunteers walk the beach all summer, usually at 6 a.m., to spot tracks, nestings, and strandings (when animals, dead or alive, wash up on the beach). For the summer of 2016, the Folly Turtle Watch had recorded 88 nests and over 6600 hatchlings! And that's not even a record.

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