Newsletter of the

Caretta Research Project

After Matthew—Hurricane Recovery Underway

On October 7th and 8th, Hurricane Matthew battered the coast of Georgia and our beloved Wassaw Island. Wind gusts approaching 100 miles per hour toppled hundreds of trees. Storm surges exceeding 12 feet flooded over and/or through the front dune, wiping out much of the nesting area from this year and inundating the adjacent forest. Rainfall totaling over 17 inches swamped the island. The scene out there must have been biblically intense!



Photo: Bert Wyatt - USFWS



Nevertheless, we are very happy to report that the turtle cabins and all of the houses on the family compound are safe and sound! The only building that sustained damage was the USFWS cabin, which had a large pine tree break over the top. Most importantly, because everyone evacuated the island, nobody was injured. Wassaw's caretakers and USFWS staff are all safe and sound and all have been working tirelessly to restore power and water Wassaw's facilities and to make the trails safe again.

As for the beach, the powerful storm surge flattened most of the front dune. It's hard to predict how this might impact nesting next season as we still have winter storms to endure. The dynamic nature of nesting beaches is nothing new to our turtles. Where one stretch of dune has been lost, another one is already taking shape. We are confident that the turtles will return to Wassaw next season and will find plenty of nice spots to incubate the next generation of little turtles.



The Fort at dead low tide. Photo: Mark Dodd - GADNR

Fall 2016

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2017 Registration:

Early registration to participate on the CRP will open for 2 weeks in December-please refer to our Facebook page or website for further information. Regular registration will open on Monday, January 2nd. We fill up quickly and only have 102 available spots, so don't get blocked out this year! ***CALL AND E-MAIL*** early on January 2nd to reserve your spot on Wassaw and help study these magnificent animals!

LOGGERHEADS NEST IN RECORD NUMBERS—AGAIN!



Georgia recorded 3,265 loggerhead sea turtle nests in 2016, making it the highest year on record since statewide monitoring of beaches began in 1989! This is incredibly exciting, as a key recovery goal for loggerheads is 2,800 nests annually in Georgia. Mark Dodd, senior wildlife biologist for GADNR, said, "When you think about the fact that for many years we averaged about 1,000 nests and this year we exceeded 3,000 … it's really gratifying." He also cautioned, however, that the recovery of loggerheads "still has a long way to go," stressing the need for continued conservation, and emphasized the partnerships – from grassroots groups to government agencies – forged to monitor nesting, restore habitats and protect sea turtles.

Wassaw saw it's highest season this year with 333 nests, 84 nests higher than our previous record of 249, set in 2013. We identified 155 individual loggerheads (also a record!): 83 "new" turtles which had never been tagged before, 58 turtles which were tagged on Wassaw in previous years, nine "turtles that were originally tagged on other islands, and four "scarred" turtles and one of unknown origin, whose histories cannot be determined.

One of this year's turtles, "Old Faithful," has one of the longest recorded nesting histories on Wassaw. She first came up in 1986, and returned in 1988, 1990, 1992, 1995, 1997, 2000, 2003, 2006, 2009, 2013 and 2016. She has deposited 36 nests over the years, containing more than 4,400 eggs, producing over 3,500 hatchlings.

Six turtles originally tagged on Wassaw were seen elsewhere this year: Four were seen nesting on other beaches: Pritchard's Island, Daufuskie Island and Beaufort, SC, and Little St. Simon's Island, GA. Two were caught in the water: one by a dipnet (by NOAA employees) off of Ocean City, DE, which was subsquently released; and one in a NOAA trawler off of Charleston, SC. Unfortunately, one of our neophyte turtles from this year was found stranded on Bay Point Island, SC. Additionally, nine turtles tagged on other beaches during previous years were seen on Wassaw this year. Three were tagged on Blackbeard Island and the other six were tagged on Jekyll Island.



Eighty-six volunteers from all over the US helped protect nearly 37,000 eggs, ultimately releasing over 23,800 loggerhead hatchlings.

WHERE DID YOU GET THAT *LOGGER-HEAD*?

Loggerhead turtles are affectionately named for their ample noggins, which are the largest of any turtle. However, that big head is NOT filled with a big brain—Instead, it's filled with lots of bone and lots of muscle, and is made for crushing its prey!

What we've noticed, however, is that not all logger-heads are created equally. We've observed that some of our nesting females have relatively large heads and some have relatively small heads, and that these differences were only loosely tied with body size. CRP biologists, lead by all-star intern Jamie Price, sought to investigate other factors that might be involved.

In short, we found that differences in head size among females were linked to where along the Atlantic coast our turtles go to feed when they're not breeding. Most of our turtles go to the Mid-Atlantic bight (north of NC) and tend to have smaller heads, while some of our turtles go to the south (S. FL and the Bahamas) and tend to have larger heads. Larger heads in the south may be a response to the larger and more diverse community of robust, benthic invertebrate prey in those areas, whereas smaller heads in the north may be a response to seasonal use of softer, gelatinous prey.



Unraveling the biological mysteries of these amazing animals through science is not only FUN, but it is also a major goal of the CRP. Moreover, studies like this one provide wonderful opportunities for young scientists, like Jamie, to conduct research and learn the scientific process.

How You Can Help Georgia's Loggerheads Sea Turtles

The CRP is a public non-profit charity (501(c)3) and we do not receive funding from the state or Federal government. We depend on outside contributions to fund operating costs of the project. Every year, we receive generous contributions and gifts to fund our research, conservation and education efforts from people like you. Here are suggestions on how you can donate your resources:

Participate on the Project and get a hands-on experience protecting the turtles
Individual Donations made directly to the Caretta Research Project
Corporate Matching Gifts that match contributions from employees to charities, doubling support
Adopt-A-Turtle for classroom learning tools, holiday gifts, birthdays, other special occasions, or for yourself
Purchase Sea Turtle Gifts from our on-line store
Honorariums and Memorials in honor of or in memory of a special person in your life
Volunteer as a Boat Captain to transport crews and gear to and from Wassaw Island during the summer.

All donations to the CRP will be used to directly fund sea turtle research, education and conservation efforts.

Celebrating 44 years of Loggerhead Research on Wassaw Island

Even in the aftermath of Hurricane Matthew, about 115 people joined the staff and Board of the Caretta Research Project at The Florence on October 20 to celebrate 44 years of research and conservation of loggerhead turtles! Special thanks go to: Chef Kyle, Gina Berchin and the Florence-the venue was perfect and the food was delicious! Ray Williams, Bruce Spradley and Randy Reese-the music was fabulous! Lynn Wright—the photos are wonderful! Please check out more of Lynn's pictures from the event at http://lwrightcaretta.blogspot.com!



















Thank you to our generous sponsors!

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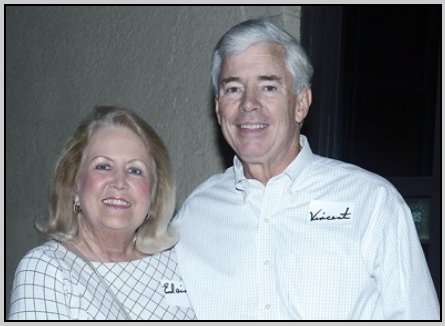
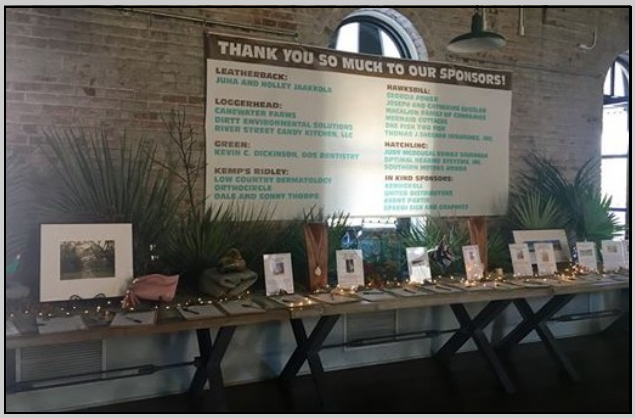






Thank you to our generous auction donors!

Amphibian Air, Mrs. Melanie Elmore, Mr. Bill Eswine, the Florence, Found Jewelry, Mr. Stan Gray, Mr. and Mrs. Kevin Iocovozzi, Mrs. Kelley Parker, Mr. Dave Peterson, Mrs. Ann Ramee, Ms. Kathleen Ramee, Dr. Beverly Ringenberg, Satchell, Savannah Philharmonic Orchestra, Sea Kayak Georgia, Service Brewing, Walks on Wassaw, Wildnerness Southeast and Mrs. Sarah Yates.



Presentations at Scientific Meetings

International Sea Turtle Symposium, Las Vegas, USA April 2017
Dr. Joseph Pfaller will present "**Tale of two oceans: meta-analysis of adult marine turtle survival**," using data from long-term tagging projects, including the Caretta Research Project.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS SINCE 1973:

- added nearly 1,560 turtles to the tagged loggerhead population;
- monitored 4,032 nests containing more than 464,600 eggs;
- successfully released nearly 286,500 hatchlings into the ocean;
- trained 22 interns who have gone to other environmental / educational programs;
- involved and educated over 3,000 volunteers from all over the world in sea turtle conservation efforts.

SHOP THE CARETTA STORE!!

Get your CRP t-shirts with a hatchling crawling down one sleeve and ball caps and visors! Check out our website for details!

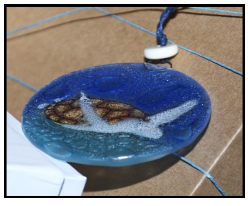


What do you get someone for Christmas who already has everything?

How about a

THREATENED SPECIES!

Support the Caretta Research Project by adopting a loggerhead sea turtle! Adopt one of the selected loggerhead sea turtles that has nested in previous years on Wassaw Island and was last seen during the 2013, 2014 or 2015 seasons. Since loggerheads typically have a 2-4 year nesting cycle, we expect that these individuals may return to Wassaw to nest during 2017!



For a donation of $30.00, you will receive an adoption kit that includes:

1) a list of adoptees and an adoption form;
2) A beautiful glass sea turtle ornament;
3) our semi-annual newsletter; and
4) a bumper sticker.

Then log on to www.carettaresearchproject.org throughout the summer to track "your" turtle's nesting activity during the 2017season!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the following individuals and organizations for their support and contributions since November 2015:

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Delegal Creek Marina-for dock space throughout the season
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