News and Appreciation from

CARETTA RESEARCH PROJECT

A Season to Remember, A Pandemic to Forget

As it was for many of you, the 2020 season of sea turtle work on Wassaw National Wildlife Refuge was a time to adapt, pivot, isolate, and holdout for better days to come. The Staff and Board of CRP had to make the extremely difficult decision to cancel volunteers this summer. The risks were simply too high. Without our dedicated and passionate volunteers to help with the sea turtle research and protection, we relied on 'skeleton' crews of self-quarantined staff, assistants, and helpers. We cannot thank these folks enough for their commitment to the project and we are already looking forward to welcoming our volunteers back to the island next season!

Turtles, of course, care little about the pandemics of us humans! Nesting on Wassaw began on May 9th and concluded on August 6th … whoops! … make that August 25th; one turtle decided to break our record for latest nest in the season. We counted 226 nests in total with 219 laid by 93 loggerheads, four by one Kemp's ridley-loggerhead hybrid, and three by one beautiful, sand-slinging green turtle. Of the 93 loggerheads, 51 were new recruits to the nesting population and 42 were remigrants that we've seen on Wassaw before, including 16 of CRP's Adopt-A-Turtles. When the season was all said and done, we had protected 23,755 eggs laid by these turtles, leading to the successful release of 13,385 hatchlings!



Participate in 2021!

Early registration to volunteer on the CRP next summer will open for two weeks from December 7th-18th. Regular registration will open on Monday, January 4th. Registration will depend on Covid-19 concerns. Please refer to our Facebook page or website for further information.

CALL (912-704-9323) or **EMAIL** (WassawCRP@aol.com) to reserve your spot on Wassaw and help study and protect loggerhead sea turtles!

Caretta Research Project

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BACKGROUND

Our Mission

It is the mission of the Caretta Research Project to ensure the long-term protection and full recovery of the Northwest Atlantic loggerhead population and the ecological roles that it plays through research, conservation and education.

Brief History

Stimulated by a noticeable decline in sea turtle populations, a trilateral collaboration between the Savannah Science Museum (Jerry Williamson), Wassaw Island Trust (Charlie Milmine, also with Museum), and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service founded the Caretta Research Project (CRP) in 1972. Starting in 1973, CRP began monitoring the loggerhead sea turtle population nesting on Wassaw Island by marking individuals. Shortly thereafter, rigorous nest protection procedures were implemented to maximize hatchling production and bolster the population into the future.

Education and public participation have been at the heart of CRP from its origin. CRP established one of the nation's first "eco-vacations" available to the public. For over 45 years, participants have traveled to Wassaw to help patrol the beach in search of nesting turtles and protect their vulnerable nests. In turn, CRP strives to foster unique experiences that empower participants with knowledge and experiences that allow them to become ambassadors for the plight of the world's sea turtles.



Major Accomplishments Since 1973

- Helped produce an 8-fold increase in loggerhead nesting on Wassaw Island National Wildlife Refuge.
- Marked and studied 1,881 individual turtles throughout their reproductive lives.
- Protected and monitored 5,142 nests, leading to the successful release of 355,665 hatchlings.
- Involved 3,591 people from 46 different states and 6 different countries in hands-on sea turtle research and conservation.
- Provided data, support, and infrastructure for conducting collaborative scientific research on sea turtles, leading to the production of 54 scientific publications and 28 research presentations.
- Trained 25 interns that have subsequently pursued careers in biology, environmental science, and education.
- Connected more than 390 people with the lives of nesting sea turtles through the Adopt-A-Turtle program.

Caretta Research Project operates as a 501(c)3 non-profit organization under Savannah Science Museum, Inc.

Thank you to our Founders, Past Staff and Board Members, and Current Partners!

The following organizations currently help Caretta Research Project pursue its mission

US Fish & Wildlife Service

Georgia Department of Natural Resources & Georgia Sea Turtle Cooperative

The Nature Conservancy

Brewer Marketing Group

Your Wedding Film *by* David Troth Wright

SciAll.org

Ms. Mallory Adventures

University of Georgia Marine Extension & Sea Grant

100 Miles

Clean Coast

Wassaw Island Trust, LLC

2020 HIGHLIGHTS



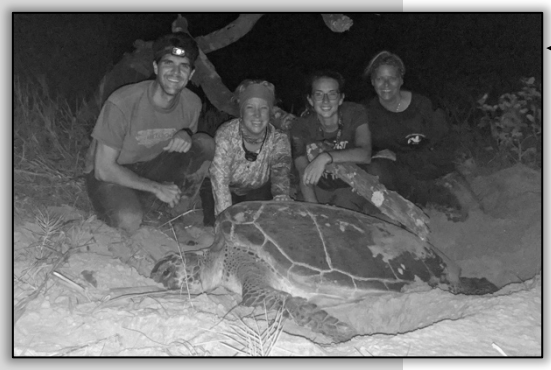
Check one of CRP's contributions to SciAll.org *What is it actually like to be a Sea Turtle Biologist?*

CRP teams up with SciAll.org!

Caretta Research Project has always used its sea turtle research platform to communicate science to the public. By living alongside biologists on Wassaw Island and participating in scientific research on sea turtles, volunteers on the project experience science and scientists firsthand.

SciAll.org, an exciting new science communication organization, hopes to bring these kinds of raw, unapologetic, real-world interactions to a global audience through video blogging. Through its YouTube channel, SciAll.org hopes to expand and diversify public interest in science by humanizing scientists, demystifying the process of scientific discovery, and mentoring students, particularly those from groups underrepresented in STEM.

With a clear common interest, CRP was excited to contribute to SciAll.org this year with a video titled *What is it actually like to be a Sea Turtle Biologist?* This video has not only brought awareness to the mission of CRP, it has connected people to the mind and heart of a scientist, bridging a gap that CRP and SciAll.org are both working to fill.



Rare green turtle nests three times!

Kemp's Ridley-Loggerhead hybrid returns!



CRP joins Marine Turtle Specialist Group

The Marine Turtle Specialist Group (MTSG) is a science-based network of some 300 volunteer experts from around the world and is regarded as the global authority on marine turtles. The mission of the MTSG is to develop and support strategies, set priorities, and provide tools that promote and guide the conservation of marine turtles, and their ecological roles and habitats.

This summer, CRP Research Director, Dr. Joe Pfaller, joined the MTSG as a member of the North Atlantic & Wider Caribbean Region. As a new member of this esteemed group, Joe hit the ground running and helped co-edit the first MTSG Regional Report for this important area, summarizing all biological information and conservation threats for marine turtles in this region. Through the MTSG, Joe will continue to help CRP pursue its mission of preserving marine turtles and their habitats for years to come.

IUCN-SSC MARINE TURTLE SPECIALIST GROUP

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

Sea Turtles Like Odors from Ocean Plastic

And that's a dangerous problem!



Sea turtles eat plastic bags because they look like jellyfish, right? But what about the other types of plastic that sea turtles eat or become entangled in. Why are they attracted to it if it doesn't *look* like food. What if it's not that simple?

CRP Research Director, Dr. Joe Pfaller, teamed up with collaborators from UNC Chapel Hill, UC Santa Cruz, and Stanford to test a new idea for why sea turtles love to mingle with ocean plastic… its odor! The authors tested whether little 10-month loggerheads (see adorable picture) respond to odors from biofouled plastic in the same way that they respond to odors from their food, a smell that they find irresistible.

In an article published in *Current Biology*, Joe et al. present their unsettling conclusion: sea turtles like odors from ocean plastic. This means that turtles might be attracted to plastic not only by the way it looks, but also by the way it smells. In an ocean full of plastic, this can become a lethal attraction.

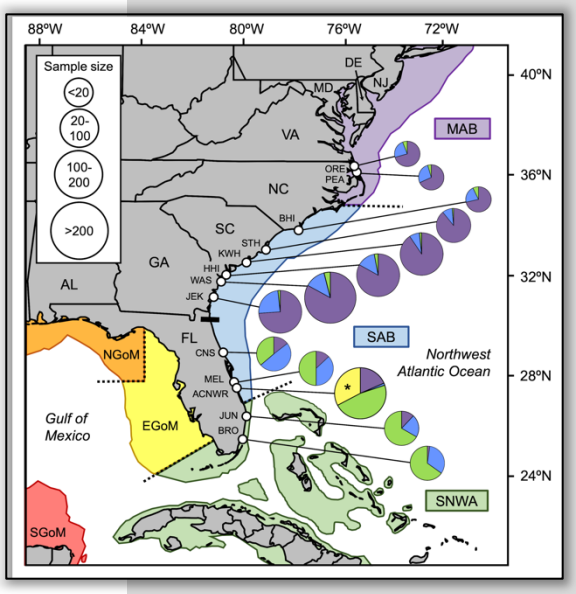
CRP Research Hits the Mainstream Media!

BBC News, Newsweek, The Economist, CNBC, ABC Australia, U.S. News and World Report, Savannah Morning News

Georgia Turtles Like Northern Waters

When we see big beautiful loggerheads laying eggs down in the low country, they sure seem like Georgia turtles. Turns out, chemical signatures in their skin tell a different story: Most loggerheads nesting in GA, as well as SC and NC, spend their non-nesting seasons up north between VA and NJ.

In an article published in *PLoS ONE*, CRP biologists and their coauthors present these results and compare them with very different patterns in FL (most remain south of GA). This study continues the productive collaboration between CRP and the Archie Carr Center for Sea Turtle Research at the University of Florida.



Research Publications & Presentations

Nalovic MA, Ceriani SA, Fuentes MMPB, Pfaller JB, Wildermann NE, Cuevas E (Eds.) (2020) Sea Turtles in the North Atlantic & Wider Caribbean Region. MTSG Regional Report 2020. Draft Report of the IUCN-SSC Marine Turtle Specialist Group, 2020.

Pfaller JB, Goforth KM , et al. (2020) Odors from marine plastic debris elicit foraging behavior in sea turtles. *Current Biology* 30:213-214.

Pfaller JB, Pajuelo M, et al. (2020) Identifying patterns in foraging-area origins in breeding aggregations of migratory species: Loggerhead turtles in the Northwest Atlantic. *PLoS ONE* 15(4): e0231325.

Limpus CJ, Miller JD, Pfaller JB (2020) Flooding-induced mortality of loggerhead sea turtle eggs. *Wildlife Research* (in press).

Butler ZP, Wenger SJ, Pfaller JB, et al. (2020) Predation of loggerhead sea turtle eggs across Georgia's barrier islands. *Global Ecology and Conservation* 23:e01139.

Thank you to our generous sponsors!

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ANNUAL CELEBRATION & FUNDRAISER

Celebrating 48 years of Sea Turtle Conservation

Navigating our way through Covid-19 not only forced us to cancel our volunteers this summer but also our annual fundraiser, a magical *al fresco* 'Night on the Bluff!' In its place, we hosted two events that were unique, personal, and socially responsible.

The first event, on September 19th, was a concert by the Rolling Stones tribute band 'Monkey Man'. On a beautiful afternoon, the band played from a private dock on the Herb River with about 75 boats in attendance. Everyone enjoyed being on the water and listening to some awesome music! During the concert, KOE Creative filmed the band and attendees, then created a 1-hour Virtual Concert Fundraiser that aired online on October 21st. We also held an online auction that closed at the end of the virtual concert, all raising funds for sea turtle research and protection activities on the Wassaw National Wildlife Refuge.

Each fundraiser event was a great success! We would like to send out a HUGE thank you to all sponsors, auction donors, and supporters for this year's fundraiser. We hope to see everyone back on The Bluff next year!





Thank you to our generous auction donors!

EXPERIENCES: 6th Sense World, Amphibian Air, Bryan O'Dell, Carrie Bazemore, Cathy Sakas, Clayer & Co., Hot Sushi Surfing Camp Sessions, Island Eye Care, Dr. Joe Pfaller, Kim Iocovozzi, Ms. Mallory Adventures, Pure Barre, Rivers & Glen, Rolfe Glover & John "Crawfish" Crawford, Ruth & Brian Weimar, Savannah Canoe & Kayak, Savannah Yoga Center. LUXURY TREATS: Alex Ormond, Barbara & Larry Perlis, Blender Bombs, Capital Bee Company, Chala Handbags, Curry & Co., Everbloom, Inc., HullSpeed Designs, Marsh Savannah, Dr. & Mrs. Michael Poole, Paulita Bennett-Martin, Sand Cloud, Savannah Facial Plastic Surgery, Summer House. ARTISTS: Abby Wolfe, Bellamy Murphy, Dr. Beverly Ringenberg, Catherine Lovett, Danielle Hughes, Dottie T. Leatherwood, Found Jewelry, Georgia Walters, Janet Moses, Julia Licht, Julie Flynt, JustGrace Designs, Kelley Parker, Lisa Barksdale Photography, Marc R. Hanson, Marcus Kenney, Maria Anna Bissacco, Dr. Robert Batchelor, Shanthi Thiruppathi, Southern Aristocratic, LLC by Holly Blanton, Stayce Koegler, Whip Savannah

GET INVOLVED

Caretta Research Project is a public non-profit charity that does not receive funding from the state or federal government.

All research, conservation, and education efforts depend on generous contributions of resources from people like you.

Here are ways to get involved:

- **Participate in CRP** and get hands on experience protecting sea turtles
- **Make an individual donation**
- **Make a corporate matching gift**
- **Organize an Honorarium or Memorial** to remember a special person in your life
- **Shop the CRP Store**

  Check out the COOLDRI long sleeve shirts in navy blue, light blue and white, and our NEW hats!









- **Join *Captains for Caretta*** and use your boat to help transport people and supplies to and from Wassaw Island in the summer
- **Attend and/or Sponsor CRP's Annual Fundraiser**

- **Adopt-A-Turtle** for your classroom, a loved one, or yourself

  CRP's Adopt-A-Turtle Kit is a wonderful gift idea for birthdays, anniversaries, Christmas, and other special occasions. Pick from a list of turtles that have faithfully nested on Wassaw Island during previous seasons. Once adopted, each turtle's nesting activity can be tracked during ANY season from the Turtle Activity page on our website and on our Facebook page.

  Kits include:

  (1) List of adoptees and an adoption form
  (2) Glass sea turtle ornament
  (3) Picture of a nesting loggerhead
  (4) CRP decal



Thank you to our *Captains for Caretta*

Mr. and Mrs. Chris Carroll
Rolfe Glover
Mr. and Mrs. Jay Gleeson
Mr. and Mrs. Phillip Grainey
Mr. and Mrs. Gabe Pitt
Mr. and Mrs. Joe Powers
Kathleen Ramee
Christopher Walls
Tristan Walls

Honorariums, Memorials, and Special Thank You's

In memory of Betsy Lawrence: Jennifer Cone, Jillisa Milner, Rita Waters, Judd Wiggins, & Donna Zeigler-Taylor

In memory of Hadrienne Mendonsa: Andy and Gloria Mendonsa

In memory of Elayne Wishart: Nadia Barbarossa, Kenneth Blaine, Christina Montalvo, Lisa Nadal, Christine Peluso, Jane Saul, Goldie Tiu, Mr. & Mrs. Bruce Bowen, Mr. & Mrs. Frederick Clodfelter, Brian Deichl, & Brian Filtz

In memory of Caroline for Hallie Wells: Ms. Kara Hickey

In honor of Jim Carr: Mrs. Linda S. Cline

Huge thanks to Dave Cahoon for fixing our Mules each year

Special thanks to Georgia Walters, Jim Olsen and Kathleen Ramee for their pre- and post-season help on Wassaw

Huge thanks to those that helped on Wassaw this summer: Maureen Cahill, Connor Casey, Allison Haltom, Valerie Havill, Amelia Luke, Gina McCullough, Jillisa Milner, Owen Ollis, Sherri Pittman, Jadyn Sethna, JoBeth Shelton, Sammie Stringer, Iris Welcome, & Ashley Whitley

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