News and Appreciation from

CARETTA RESEARCH PROJECT

Wassaw Breaks 300 Nests for the 3rd Time!

Since 1973, the number of loggerhead nests laid on Wassaw has rarely surpassed 300 nests and 2021 was one of them with 316! We had 333 nests in 2016 and a record-shattering 480 nests in 2019. Because individual loggerheads most often nest on a 3-year cycle, we were expecting 2021 to be relatively low and 2022 to be another whopping year. While the possibility of a huge 2022 remains, we were pleasantly surprised by the turnout this year. We are sincerely grateful to the 62 dedicated volunteers that helped on the beach this summer while we remained at partial capacity due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

Nesting on Wassaw began on May 17th and concluded on August 5th … Whoops! Again! … make that August 24th; three turtles decided that that was too early, which extended our hatching season to the end of October. We counted 316 nests laid by 112 loggerheads; no other turtle species were seen this year. Of the 112 loggerheads, 47 were new recruits to the nesting population and 65 were remigrants that we've seen on Wassaw before, including 14 of CRP's Adopt-A-Turtles. When the season was all said and done, we had protected 35,212 eggs laid by these turtles, leading to the successful release of 18,237 hatchlings!



Participate in 2022!

Early registration to volunteer on the CRP next summer will open for one week from Dec 15th-22nd, 2021. Regular registration will open on Monday, Jan 3rd, 2022. 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 almost 50 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 1,930 individual turtles throughout their reproductive lives.
- Protected and monitored 5,440 nests, leading to the successful release of 373,902 hatchlings.
- Involved 3,623 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 58 scientific publications and 28 research presentations.
- Trained 26 interns that have subsequently pursued careers in biology, environmental science, and education.
- Connected more than 410 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 DNR & 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

Kennesaw State University



An Adopt-A-Turtle named Zelda was recorded laying *SEVEN* nests on Wassaw in 2021!

Wassaw Welcomes 14 Adopt-A-Turtles

Each nesting season Wassaw welcomes a special group of turtles that you might call "Wassawphilic" … perhaps you describe yourself this way too! These turtles love Wassaw and consistently return to their lay eggs on Wassaw nest after nest and season after season. Because we see these Wassawphiles so consistently during our research patrols, many of them are members of CRP's Adopt-A-Turtle (AAT) program.

CRP staff and volunteers greeted 14 AATs on the beach this season: Astrid, Sweet Cheeks, Tallulah, Presley, Tiamat, Micah, Ronnie, Neritina, Constance, Zelda, Bailey, Kristi, Tybee Lee, and Tab. Neritina and Constance have been nesting on Wassaw since 1996 and 1999, respectively, and Zelda was recorded laying SEVEN nests on Wassaw … in just this season!

Supporters of the AAT program make a financial contribution, select a turtle from our list of AAT candidates, then experience the joy and anticipation of tracking their adoptee's nesting activity from the Turtle Activity page on our website and on our Facebook page. CRP's Adopt-A-Turtle Kit is also a wonderful gift idea for birthdays, classrooms, Christmas, and other special occasions. Or you could Adopt-A-Turtle for yourself!

Kits include:

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

NOT included: Turtle!

CRP joins Plastics Free Savannah Coalition

Plastic Free Savannah is a community coalition made up of activists, scientists, business owners, educators, students, and concern citizens who all want to see less plastic pollution impacting our communities and environments. CRP joined the fight against Single-Use Plastics (SUP), like to-go cups, which are a big problem in Savannah's Historic District.

As a first major step, the Plastic Free Savannah coalition proposed a plastic-free resolution that would phase out SUP inside city buildings in Savannah. On May 27th, the Savannah City Council passed the resolution with unanimous support! A great step to combat a truly massive problem.



RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

Eggshells Reveal More Turtle Mysteries



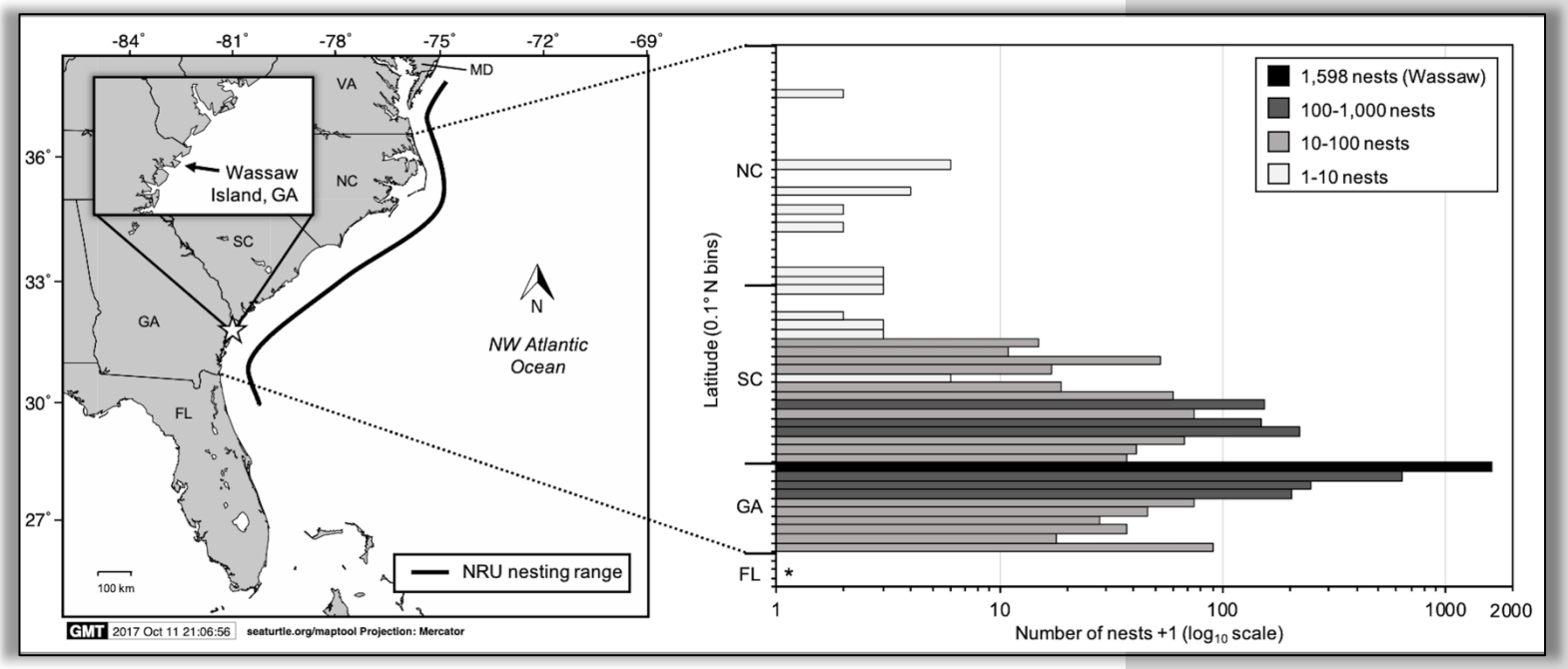
When a female turtle builds an egg inside her body, she embeds her unique genetic signature in the eggshell membrane. As a result, the female leaves her identity within each clutch of eggs she deposits on the beach. When researchers from Univ. of Georgia discovered this - in part thanks to CRP's tagging program - a silver bullet was found! By collecting one eggshell from every loggerhead nest laid between North Florida and Maryland, we can now identify where and when each turtle nests without having to intercept her on the beach.

After 12 seasons of eggshell collections, many unsolved mysteries about our nesting population are being revealed. In recent publications in 2017 and 2021, UGA's Dr. Brian Shamblin discovered that most loggerheads in our area use less than 20 km of beach within and between nesting seasons, while some may use up to 725 km! This means that many, if not most, of our turtles use multiple nesting beaches, which has important consequences for how we study the population

What does this mean for the turtles nesting on Wassaw? CRP researchers and their co-authors recently used these eggshell genetic data to show that of all the nests laid by Wassaw turtles between 2010-2017, only 41% of those nests were actually laid on Wassaw (see figure below). While the turtles that we see on Wassaw tend to use Wassaw most often (black bar), they also frequently use many other beaches in Georgia and South Carolina. This study, set to be published in the journal Marine Biology this winter, revealed the importance of understanding the degree of site fidelity to a focal nesting beach when estimating key demographic rates in sea turtle populations.

(see www.CarettaResearchProject.org/publications for PDFs of publications)

Of the 3,928 nests laid by turtles that laid at least one nest on Wassaw between 2010-2017, only 41% of those nests were laid on Wassaw!



CRP Continues Fruitful Partnership with The Nature Conservancy

Past, Present, & Future

Wassaw Island was purchased in the 1860s by George Parsons, a businessman from New England. In the late 1960s, Wassaw was under threat of development, so The Nature Conservancy (TNC) helped facilitate the transfer of most of the island to the USFWS, protecting it from development forever. TNC supports the long-term protection of Wassaw National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and serves in a management advisory role. This vested interest in Wassaw NWR led to a very successful, collaborative partnership between TNC and Caretta Research Project.

The Nature Conservancy purchased all but a small compound on Wassaw Island in 1966, which helped to ultimately protect it as a National Wildlife Refuge

Since 2016, TNC has helped CRP maintain its long-term research and collaborative efforts, conservation initiatives and educational programming by issuing an annual grant to help fund lodging expenses for staff and volunteers on Wassaw NWR. This allows CRP to continue to collect data to generate scientifically grounded results that can be applied to sea turtle conservation both regionally and internationally and is used by local coastal managers and government agencies to develop long-term management plans for Northwest Atlantic loggerheads. Additionally, TNC uses the data for the South Atlantic Marine Assessment and Mapping for Resilient and Connected Sites.

Annual Sea Turtle Celebration and Fundraiser Moved to April 20th, 2022

… CRP Turns 50 Next Year!

After cancelling our in-person fundraiser last year, we were so excited to plan this year's *Night on the Bluff*! However, as Covid-19 rates spiked again in late summer, we decided to postpone this event until the Spring of 2022.

Next year will be a big year for CRP, as we anticipate that we will have much to celebrate! We are expecting another banner nesting year along the coast, we hope to be fully open for volunteers, AND… it will be CRP's 50th season! Our annual *Night on the Bluff* fundraiser will be held on Wednesday, April 20th, 2022. Then, we will have a huge blow out party in the Fall, where we hope everyone that has participated on and supported the project in any way, or even if you just love sea turtles, will come to celebrate and share stories about Wassaw life! We will also be sending out a call for photos for a slide show presentation to be played at both the *Night on the Bluff* Spring fundraiser and the end of season celebration. If you have any photos you'd like to see in the presentation, please send them to WassawCRP@aol.com with photo credit.

We hope to see you there!

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:

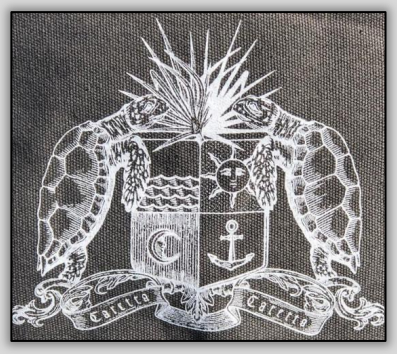
- **Participate in CRP** and get hands on experience protecting sea turtles
- **Make an individual donation**
- **Make a corporate matching gift**
- **Organize an Honorarium or Memorial** to remember a special person in your life
- **Shop the CRP Store**

  Check out the COOLDRI long sleeve shirts in navy blue, light blue, and white. Stay tuned for new colors!









- **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*

Dan Bromstad & Eleanor Rhangos
Chris Carroll
Al and Felecia Cook
Jay and Sally Gleeson
Gary and Amy Hart
James Martin
Larry and Barbara Perlis
Gabe and Lori Pitt
Joe and Chris Powers
Kathleen Ramee
Chris & Tristan Walls
Katie and Gram Wohlust

Honorariums, Memorials, and Special Thank You's

In memory of Honor Cobbs: Dr. Melissa Cobbs
In memory of Emily Bergren: Jon and Linda Newmire
In memory of Elizabeth "Betsy" Lawrence: Georgia Walters
In memory of Dr. David Byck: Margaret Bishop
In memory of Kathryn Leichty: Joan Barnard and Ariana Duke
In memory of Gordon "Batman" Varndoe: The Stillwell Family
In memory of Paula Elizabeth Schaefer: IMS Solutions Group

Dedicated to Suzanne B. Ewing: Robert Ewing

In honor of Georgia Walters 50th birthday: Dr. and Mrs. Kenneth Hoeltzel
In honor of Lynda Beam's 80th birthday: Mr. and Mrs. N. Calhoun Anderson
In honor of Dene Shepherd's birthday: Ms. Jacquie Wansley

Landings Harbor and Delegal Creek Marina for use of marina facilities

IKEA for furniture for the staff cabin

We thank our retail partners for carrying CRP products:
Mandy + Ally
Marsh Savannah
One Fish Two Fish

Huge thanks to Dave Cahoon for fixing our Mules each year

Special thanks to Jim Olsen and Kathleen Ramee for their seasonal help on Wassaw

ADDTL. CONTRIBUTIONS
SINCE NOVEMBER 2019

ARRIBADA
Anderson-Rogers Foundation, Inc., Imlay Foundation, Inc.

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The Nature Conservancy

GREEN
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KEMP'S RIDLEY
The J. C. Lewis Foundation, Inc.

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Caretta Research Project
Savannah Science Museum, Inc.
PO Box 9841
Savannah, GA 31412
(912) 704 – 9323
WassawCRP@aol.com
www.CarettaResearchProject.org

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