

LOCAL // ENVIRONMENT

## 45 Kemp's ridley sea turtles make unusual journey to water after hatching near Matagorda Bay



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June 16, 2022 | Updated: June 17, 2022 8:03 p.m.



Conservationists don't usually think to look near Texas' inland waters for the critically endangered Kemp's ridley sea turtle. That made a sighting of the reptiles on Monday near Matagorda Bay all the more surprising.

The discovery led to the rescue and guiding of 45 turtles to the bay. They hatched on Magnolia Beach in Calhoun County, southeast of Port Lavaca, during International Sea Turtle Week.

"This has been the best sea turtle week ever," said Pamela Plotkin, director of the Texas Sea Grant College Program at Texas A&M University. "It was one of those totally unexpected things that may only happen once in a lifetime."

Sea turtles usually nest on barrier island beaches. That's because the terrain is more suitable for digging, and the beaches are more accessible to the Gulf of Mexico, where the turtles swim and meet their mates, the marine biologist said. The female turtle who laid her eggs at Magnolia Beach had to work through shells and vegetation to build her nest – not an easy task.

Eggs left on the beach only have a 45 percent chance of hatching – and that’s mostly in the more favorable gulf-side conditions, according to Texas Sea Grant. They are also susceptible to predators. The trek to water is a critical time, and the Magnolia Beach turtles had a hand from passersby.

Two maintenance workers with Calhoun County Precinct 1 Commissioner’s Office spotted about 25 of the Kemp’s ridleys hatching and heading the wrong direction, toward the shiniest horizon they could see: concrete.

“I thought, ‘We better help them because it’s a good ways to the water!’” one of the workers, Zach Padron, said.

He and coworker Jason Gonzalez began turning them around, and Commissioner David Hall, called the county’s marine extension agent for help. The agent, RJ Shelly, arrived and excavated the turtle nest with Plotkin guiding him over the phone, according to a news release.

Another 20 turtles emerged from their birthplace, which was within 10 feet of a roadway. The Kemp’s ridleys had to be actively monitored, but they all made it to the bay, Plotkin said.

Kemp’s ridley sea turtles aren’t often found in Matagorda Bay, but green sea turtles are, Plotkin said. Conservation efforts are ongoing in the body of water, and a recent study found that an “abundance” of green sea turtles live and feed there after decades of endangerment. A commercial sea turtle fishery located at the bay had nearly decimated the population by the early 1900s.

The Kemp’s ridley is the official state sea turtle.