

The Tip of the Iceberg

By TJ Fox, certified Texas Master Naturalist

Friday afternoon, June 12, I was engaged in one of my regular activities—an afternoon nap—when I got a call from a seasonal tech at the Turtle Lab at Padre Island National Seashore. She wanted me to be on the “hatchling release team” for Saturday morning. I have participated in the Kemp's Ridley Recovery Program on Padre Island since 2001 and have attended several hatchling releases, but have never participated as part of the release team. I hesitated, knowing the release would take about an hour and the drive would be a three-hour round trip, but finally said yes.

So at 4:15 am (yes, there is a 4:15 in the morning) I was driven from bed by my little-used alarm clock. I took a shower to clear my head and dressed as I had been instructed: “Turtle Patrol Team” t-shirt, dark pants, dark socks, and dark tennis shoes. Dressed in dark clothing, the team won't distract the hatchlings during their crawl to the surf. By 4:45 am I'm on the road for the 68-mile trip to the Malaquite Beach Visitors' Center. By 6:15, I'm at the visitors' center along with about a dozen volunteers and a growing crowd of people who have come to see the release. We, the volunteers, soon made our way down to the beach to set up for the release.

Over time, the release of Kemp's Ridley hatchlings has developed into a well-orchestrated event. First, we covered all the ghost crab holes in the release area, removed all debris, and raked it smooth. Next we deployed rubber traffic-style barriers and roped off the release area to keep the visitors at a safe distance. Safe for the hatchlings, that is... Then we readied the gull-defense tools.

Gull defense comes in two forms. First, four PVC pipes about 12 feet in length with cross members and brightly colored streamers tied to them- think of a Roman legion banner- are placed about the site. Next are straight poles, again with colored streamers. These are held by volunteers. The second line of defense is a piece of netting about 15X15 feet with poles attached to the corners, allowing it to be positioned high above the hatchlings, Donna Shaver (head of the Kemp's ridley Restoration Project), and others who are releasing. My job is to hold one corner pole of this net.

Now Donna Shaver has the two nest boxes brought from her SUV. These are the Styrofoam coolers in which the recovered eggs were originally packed, used to incubate the eggs, and now full of hatchlings eager to get into the water. The boxes are covered with a black cloth slipcovers to help keep the babies quiet. We're now ready for the visitors to come down from the visitors' center. Almost 100 people of all ages have gathered at 6:30 in the morning to watch the babies' release. This gathering will happen over and over again during the summer. That's the result of effective public relations.





Finally, it's time to see the stars of the show—109 Kemp's ridley hatchlings. Donna Shaver and the National Seashore Superintendent each kneel in front of a box. Both have on disposable plastic gloves to protect the babies. They remove the covers and the lids and carefully start lifting the hatchlings out of the box and placing them on the sand. The hatchlings are the size of a 50-cent piece and easily fit onto your open palm. They are placed close together; in some cases, one partially on top of another. Almost immediately they began moving toward the surf. The sun is now just above

the horizon. Current thinking is that the babies move toward the sun, thus the early morning release.

While some move purposely toward the surf, others just sit. Some babies scramble sideways and a few turn away from the water. Donna patiently turns those around. This is no “walk in the park” for the babies. Although they have been given many advantages, they are not released directly into the surf. To enter the surf, they must crawl a good 30 feet. That's a long way for babies this small. It's not long, however, before the first hatchling touches the water. The crowd claps and shouts. Now the babies are all moving toward the surf, but even when they reach it, the end of a wave may carry them backward several feet. But by now, nothing will stop them. Although every baby is moving, the rule “the shortest distance is a straight line” does not apply. The hatchlings all started within 4 feet of each other but, are now spread out across 20 feet of beach. The volunteers holding streamer poles cannot move a foot without a careful look around. The net holders move to keep the net over the hatchlings while Donna and the Superintendent move forward on their knees.

All the activity has brought the gulls to see if this means food. The volunteers with streamer poles wave them about. A couple of really curious gulls dive close but are discouraged by the streamers and shouts of the volunteers. Two volunteers are in knee-deep water with streamers held high. Gulls are the main concern—the occasional tern flying by causes no alarm. In years past, volunteers used to be stationed some distance down the beach with Cheetos to draw away the gulls. This practice has been discontinued because Cheetos are not good for gulls, and Donna doesn't want to cause them harm while distracting them from the baby turtles.

Two volunteers have the envious job of carrying a hatchling to the crowd barrier to give the audience a first-hand view of a baby. Again, each is wearing plastic gloves. Another volunteer begins taking close-ups of the babies with cameras from the crowd. Many visitors will go home with close-ups of the hatchlings without endangering them.

By now, all but a few of the babies have reached the surf. The crowd grows even more attentive, not wanting to miss the last



baby entering the surf. Finally, the last hatchling disappears into the water. The crowd shouts happily and claps. We volunteers shout and clap, too. It's over for the day. More hatchling may be released today, but the release will be done in a deserted area with only a few people present. With so many hatchlings these days, releases must be more efficient, but keeping the public involved is important. That's why releases are made at the visitors' center.

Looking at the people as the crowd disburses, I'm reminded that what they saw was much like looking at an iceberg. The hatchlings entering the surf are only a fraction of the effort expended on this program. So much more lies hidden starting with the commitment of the National Parks Service, the activities of the staff on a year-round basis, volunteer training in the spring followed by three months of beach patrols, and finally the hatchling releases. What started as the vision of one individual, Donna Shaver, has spread to involve hundreds of people along the entire Texas coast. Last year over 15,000 hatchlings were released. That's success!

Interested in attending a release? Call the "Hatchling Release Hotline" at 361-949-7163 (24/7) for release information. Sure, it's early in the morning, but it's worth the lost sleep.

