

Saving the Stranded

Stranded Kemp's ridley turtles are often found in racks of seaweed and eel grass.

Cape volunteers on rescue mission for turtles

By Don Wilding
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It was about five years ago that Bill Allan of Eastham found his first stranded sea turtle on the sands of Skaket Beach in Orleans. Like many of these denizens of the deep that wash ashore during the late weeks of autumn, the dinner plate-sized Kemp's ridley turtle was beached after being stunned by the sudden drop in temperature of the Cape Cod Bay waters, and was only hours from death.

"The satisfaction from saving an endangered species is just incredible," says Allan, 60, who previously worked in corporate finance in Connecticut. "I was hooked."

Tony Pane of East Harwich, who has joined Allan on many of those walks, day and night, on a stretch of beach and flats from First Encounter Beach to Kingsbury Beach in Eastham, concurs.

"It's a sense of adventure that I don't get in too many other places," says Pane. "It's fulfilling and it's a great feeling to find a turtle you that know will be rehabilitated, especially when you're out walking at 3 in the morning, in a storm."

That satisfaction and dedication belongs not just to Allan and Pane, but to an entire core of Massachusetts Audubon Society volunteers who comb the bay beaches every year from late October to early January, in search of Kemp's ridley, loggerhead, and green sea turtles that find themselves trapped in the confines of Cape Cod Bay as temperatures plummet and the north winds begin to increase in intensity. First

organized nearly 30 years ago by Bob Prescott, who has since become the Wellfleet Bay Sanctuary's Director, the group now has dozens of volunteers around the Cape that can be turned to in an emergency situation. Local and off-Cape nature enthusiasts alike can get in on the action by signing up for Wellfleet Bay Sanctuary's Sea Turtle Ecology and Rescue weekend seminar, to be held over the weekend of Nov. 18-20.

"Generally, a turtle that is stranded in the bay in October isn't getting out," says Prescott, who found his first turtle in 1974, began looking more actively in 1975 and started involving the public in 1977. However, it wasn't until 1995 that the rate of stranded turtles increased so much, the need for round-the-clock turtle coverage became necessary.



Don Lewis of the Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary finds a stunned turtle on a bay beach, one of many that has been stranded over the years.

Photos courtesy Mass. Audubon Society / Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary

Allan, who also does research on diamondback terrapins, and Pane worked together on the volunteer grounds crew at the sanctuary, and can often be found on the Eastham beaches. Prescott often patrols the Skaket / Namskaket / Rock Harbor Beaches of Orleans, and Julie O'Neill of Dennis is out looking for both turtles and birds on north-facing bay beaches in her hometown. "Part of you hopes that you don't find any," says O'Neill. "But when you do, it's a very satisfying feeling."

Allan, Pane, O'Neill, Ed Davis of Harwich, and Bill Harrington of Dennis are some of the folks that you might find out walking on a bay beach, particularly after the wind has been

blowing in from a northerly direction over a 24 to 36-hour period. It's here where cell phones have come in especially handy, especially after that busy 1995 season.

"It was after that we sort of perfected this modern technique," continued on next page

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with night patrols, day patrols, and scrambling volunteers, getting them out, getting people on the road, and waiting for turtles to be found," Prescott explained. "We can have people on the beach with cells, and if someone is cruising on Route 6A, we can have volunteers in Dennis and Brewster, and somebody will call them at, say, Sea Street. The vehicle gets right over, meets them, picks the turtle up, brings them back over here, it's weighed and measured, and meanwhile, we've called the office, and the office has got a volunteer ready to drive it to Boston. If it's before noon, the turtle is literally going from the beach at a 10 o'clock high tide to the New England Aquarium by 2 or 3. So they begin the critical care then, rather than waiting 24 hours like we used to."

The results have been good for Allan, who's found 23 turtles in four years of walking the beach at all hours, mostly between Kingsbury and First



The Massachusetts Audubon Society's Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary has posted signs like these on bay beaches over the last several years, such as this one stapled to a beached log in the East End of Provincetown in January of 2003.

Staff photo by Don Wilding

Encounter Beaches in Eastham. "When you go out at 2 or 3 in the morning, it's a little scary," Allan is quick to admit.

"Getting out of a warm bed takes some effort and some dedication."

"Our success rate with the

turtles has increased because of the people getting involved," adds Wellfleet Bay Sanctuary Education Coordinator Melissa Lowe. "With the people going out at night, with 35-degree temperatures and the wind blowing, many of the turtles wouldn't make it until morning."

Many of these turtles are either threatened or endangered, and that makes the rescue workers' mission even more important to them. "This is a purely physical process," says Prescott of the reason why turtles strand on the beach in November. "It's not disease related — it really is the weather. There is that annual fluctuation, but it's, in a sense, non-discriminatory. The weather is delivering turtles to our doorstep."

The turtle express

Getting the turtles to the New England Aquarium is as big a task as finding them on the beach, and that's where people like Barbara Murphy of Orleans come into the picture. Murphy has never found any turtles herself, but she has been involved with getting bigger turtles, most notably a 160-pound loggerhead, off the beach on the special "turtle cart, which is a special stretcher invented by sanctuary naturalist Dennis Murley and built by Laser Boats, that can get the reptiles off the beach and into the waiting vehicle.

The transition from beach to car, and dispatching beach walkers, can also be an adventure. At one time, Cape turtle rescuers would meet the New England Aquarium workers halfway between the Cape and Boston. "I'm surprised that we haven't been arrested swapping turtles in the parking lots, especially at night," chuckled Prescott. "We'd meet at some place like Friendly's, and there would be 5 or 10 of us trying to decide who's walking where, and the police would roll in, and we're all standing in the parking lot in all of our gear, and they're going, 'Don't give us that sea turtle story ...'"

Murphy has done the Boston drive almost a dozen times, mostly with Kemp ridley turtles that weigh in the neighborhood of 10 pounds. "You have to drive with the car cool, because you don't want them to heat up too quickly," noted Murphy, who has also snorkeled in the Caribbean Sea and observed the turtles up close. It's fascinating to take them up there, and get

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Turtles

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inside the medical end of the aquarium. They're very good at explaining it, and then you're in the aquarium for the day."

"I went to the aquarium and saw the rehabilitation section," added Pane. "And I've been lucky enough to be at the Mote facility in Sarasota, Florida (where many of the Cape Cod turtles are treated at and released from). It's nice to have seen a number of different stages in the process, seeing the

places to trace their rehabilitation in Boston and Florida."

"Some of our turtles go to the marine lab in Florida, and the staff there knows our people," Prescott added. "They show up at the front desk, and say, 'Hey, I work on the Cape - we rescue turtles,' and they say, 'Hey, c'mon in!' They show them the whole setup and tour, and our people say, 'Hey, that's my turtle!'"

Mass. Audubon will have a number of turtle-related events this month. In addition to the rescue orientation weekend, there's also a Sea Turtle Rescue

Festival for kids on Nov. 26 (see www.wellfleetbay.org for more information) - an event where the youngsters may get to see some of the turtles that are rescued by volunteers.

So why the fascination with these denizens of the deep? "There's something about the critter themselves," Lowe says with a smile. Prescott agrees, saying that it all boils down to "the human response to nature in need. These are people who have an appreciation for nature."

If you go ...

What: Sea Turtle Ecology and Rescue Training Session

Where: Mass. Audubon Society's Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary, Rte. 6, South Wellfleet

When: Nov. 18-20, beginning at 4:30 p.m. on Friday and ending at 4:30 p.m. on Sunday

What's Happening?: Lectures on sea turtle strandings and sea turtle biology; introduction to sea turtle strandings; and sea turtle patrols (day and night) on the beach.

Information: 508-349-2615 or www.wellfleetbay.org

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What to do if you find a turtle

While turtles are the object of rescue missions like whales, dolphins, and seals, there are some very different rules to dealing with turtles. Unlike the others, which are mammals, turtles are cold-blooded reptiles. Signs are posted on bay beaches explaining that many of these turtles are endangered species, and what steps to take if you spot one. Generally, the rules go this way:

- Move the turtle (if you can) above the high tide line, and don't move it back into the water. Don't attempt to move the turtle from the beach;
- Cover it with seaweed or eel grass to cover it from wind exposure. Mark the spot with a piece of beach debris;
- **Call the Mass. Audubon Society as soon as you get off the beach at 508-349-2615** (after hours, leave a message on ext. 104). Try to provide specific information to the sanctuary (location, time, tide, wind direction and speed, water temperature, etc.);
- Suddenly moving the turtle to a much warmer place can be dangerous, and medicating them isn't the issue. "It's not a case of getting medication into them, but getting their chemicals balanced," notes Wellfleet Bay Sanctuary Director Bob Prescott.