

Observing Nesting Sea Turtles

Witnessing a nesting sea turtle is one of the most incredible experiences one can have on the beach. Mother sea turtles lay their nests at night, crawling out of the sea to deposit their eggs on the beach. This is a very vulnerable stage in a sea turtle's life cycle, and adhering to the following guidelines is of utmost importance. Disturbances can cause her to abandon the nesting attempt.

Follow these guidelines while observing a nesting turtle:

- Maintain a distance of at least 30 feet.
- Keep a low profile: sit or duck into the shadows. Sudden movements can scare the turtle.
- Be silent, only whisper when necessary.
- Remain behind the turtle; do not let her see you.
- Do not use flashlights or flash photography; turtles have very sensitive eye sight. Only use a red light when necessary.
- Do not block her path back to the ocean—blocking her path may cause her to go in the wrong direction.



Photo by Adren Anderson



Photo by Jennifer Pruss

Observing Hatchling Sea Turtles

55 to 70 days after a nest is laid, baby sea turtles will emerge from the sand and begin their journey to the water. This is an extremely important stage of a turtle's life as well as a very unique and unforgettable event to observe.

Follow these guidelines while observing hatchlings:

- Allow hatchlings to travel to the beach unassisted. During this time, they imprint the magnetic field of the nesting beach and orient themselves for their first swim.
- Do not use lights or flash photography. Hatchlings use light as their cue to reach the water and become disoriented with artificial lighting.
- Do not touch hatchlings or block their path to the water.

A GUIDE TO SEA TURTLE ENCOUNTERS

ST. JOHN, USVI

*St. John Sea Turtle Monitoring
and Protection Program*



Photo by Caroline Rogers



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About This Guide

Sea turtles have been swimming the world's oceans for over 200 million years. Witnessing these creatures in their natural habitat is nothing short of magical. Sea turtles can be found on the beaches and in the water surrounding St. John. Encountering sea turtles can create priceless memories, however, human interference can disturb their natural behaviors.

This guide is meant to provide beachgoers and nature enthusiasts information for proper observational etiquette.



Photo by Caroline Rogers

Observing turtles in the water

4 species of sea turtles can be found swimming in the Virgin Islands. Greens and hawksbills are commonly seen foraging in seagrass beds and coral reefs, while leatherbacks may be found in the deep waters offshore. Loggerhead sightings have been recorded, but are very rare.

Follow these guidelines while observing turtles in the water:

- Maintain a respectful distance—if the turtle swims away from you, you are too close.
- Do not overcrowd the turtle, trap it between yourself and the beach, or block its path to the surface of the water. This can disrupt breathing, resting, and feeding habits.
- Never touch a turtle. Not only is it a federal violation of the Endangered Species Act, but it can stress the turtle, disrupting normal behavior and increasing vulnerability to disease.
- Do not feed the turtles.
- Take photographs, but do not use the flash, as it can be disorienting.

More Ways to Help:

- Pick up your trash and reduce your waste. Millions of marine animals are negatively impacted by marine debris.
- Turn your beachfront lights out at night.
- Watch for turtles while boating to avoid collisions.
- Report any harassment by calling a NPS ranger at 866-995-8467

Volunteer for the St. John Sea Turtle Nest Monitoring and Protection Program

The volunteer-based beach monitoring program, supported by the Friends of the Virgin Islands National Park, runs from July-November.

Contact Information

Virgin Islands National Park
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