



ASCENSION ISLAND



HAWKSBILL TURTLES

In addition to Ascension Island's famous green turtles, smaller numbers of Critically Endangered hawksbill turtles are also found in the near-shore habitats of the Island. Hawksbills have never been recorded nesting on Ascension, and from their sizes it seems likely that all of the individuals found here are sexually immature juveniles. It appears that Ascension Island serves as a mid-Atlantic developmental habitat for these turtles before they recruit to their adult foraging grounds, likely to be located in Brazil or tropical West Africa.



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VIEWING TURTLES ON ASCENSION

Visitors to Ascension have the opportunity to witness female turtles nesting (December – June) and baby turtles hatching (February – July). The best way to see Ascension's turtles is to join a guided 'turtle tour' run by the AIG Conservation Department. Pre-booking is recommended – please contact the Tourist Office for more information.

If you wish to view nesting turtles without a guide please observe the following code of good practice to avoid causing disturbance:

- Do not approach turtles as they are leaving the sea or crawling up the beach as they will usually abandon nesting and return to the water.
- Only approach a turtle once she is settled in a hole and has commenced laying her eggs. You can tell when a turtle is laying as she will be very still (not digging) and will be positioned with her head facing upwards, moving gently up and down as eggs fall into the nest
- When you approach, do so slowly and from behind, avoiding sudden movements.
- Please avoid taking flash photographs and only use head torches with a red light setting: bright, white lights startle turtles and can disorientate hatchlings as they try to make their way to the sea.

Image Credits

Ascension Island Conservation Department



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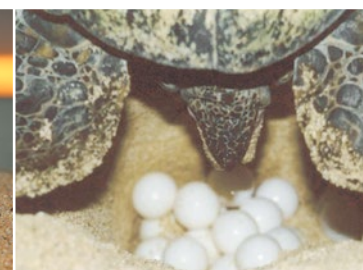


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MARINE TURTLES OF ASCENSION ISLAND



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Ascension has the second largest nesting population of the green turtle in the entire Atlantic Ocean and the largest marine turtle nesting population of any of the UK Overseas Territories, with over 25,000 nests annually.

The population was severely depleted by harvesting of nesting females for meat during the 19th and early 20th centuries, but is currently recovering strongly after decades of protection. Data gathered from a long-term population monitoring programme shows that, since 1977, numbers of nests on Long Beach have increased exponentially from around 1,000 per year to more than 10,000.

With thanks to research carried out over the last 35 years by visiting researchers (in particular the Marine Turtle Research Group), island volunteers and more recently the AIG Conservation Department, we now have a better understanding of green turtles visiting Ascension and protective laws help to ensure their safety. We know that turtles travel, at three to four year intervals, to Ascension from their feeding grounds off the coast of South America. During this mammoth journey and subsequent stay on Ascension the turtles must go without food as the sea grasses and seaweeds they prefer to eat do not grow in the deep, rocky coastal waters around the island.

Both male and female turtles migrate to Ascension Island and can often be seen mating in shallow bays between November and March. Females often mate with more than one male at the beginning of the nesting season, meaning that the hatchlings from a single nest can have several different fathers.

BREEDING

NESTING

HATCHING

Females are believed to return most often to the beach from which they themselves hatched, and laboriously excavate a large 'nest pit' within which a secondary 'egg chamber' is delicately hollowed out with their flippers. Between 120 and 150 eggs are then laid in the chamber and are carefully covered so as to ensure availability of oxygen during incubation and development. The whole nesting process can take several hours to complete. In 2012, scientists in the AIG Conservation Department and from the University of Exeter used new technology to track the turtles throughout the breeding season and found that, on average, females lay six separate clutches of eggs, with an interval of two weeks between each clutch, before their five to six week return journey to their foraging grounds off the coast of Brazil.

The sex of the hatchlings is determined by the temperature of the sand in the nest during incubation. Warmer temperatures produce mainly females, and cooler temperatures produce a majority of males. The temperature determining sex ratio differs between species and nest locations, e.g. North East Bay has some black sand and so is warmer than Long Beach, and thus produces a greater proportion of female hatchlings. Nests hatch 6 – 8 weeks after being laid and then the hatchlings emerge *en masse* or in small groups, a mechanism to overwhelm would-be predators and increase the chance of survival. Still it is estimated that only one in 1,000 to 10,000 sea turtles will live to maturity to complete the cycle and return to Ascension Island to nest.

