



The United Kingdom & Irish Turtle Code

Advice for sea users on how to deal with marine turtle encounters

V 3.1 2025

As a sea user, you can help in the effort to protect endangered marine turtles by providing information about your encounters with these spectacular creatures in UK waters.

MARINE TURTLES ARE LEGALLY PROTECTED

There is no offence if turtles are caught accidentally in fishing gear. Nor is it an offence to help turtles if entangled or stranded, or temporarily to hold dead turtles for later examination by experts.

However, marine turtles are protected in Britain.

This means that:

- turtles may not be deliberately killed or caught
- live turtles may not be landed unless for the purpose of tending them or enabling their subsequent release
- dead turtles or shells obtained from turtles in UK waters may not be possessed unless the animal was lawfully acquired
- turtles and their derivatives may not be sold or offered for sale without UK government permission, unless they are antiques acquired before 1st June 1947 (with documented proof)
- turtles and their derivatives may not be imported or exported without UK government permission.

The following legislation pertains to marine turtles:

- Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended), in England and Wales.
- Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010, in England and Wales.
- Conservation (Natural Habitats, &c.) Regulations 1994 as amended, in Scotland.
- Conservation (Natural Habitats etc.) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007.
- Control of Trade in Endangered Species (Enforcement) Regulations (1997) as amended, in the UK.
- Customs and Excise Management Act 1979.
- Isle of Man Wildlife Act 1990.

PLEASE REPORT ALL TURTLE ENCOUNTERS

ENGLAND/WALES & SCOTLAND

ALL RECORDS

Rod Penrose or Mat Westfield, Marine Environmental Monitoring.
01239 683033 (24hrs)
info@strandings.com

LIVE STRANDINGS/ ENTANGLEMENTS
RSPCA 0300 1234999
BDMLR 01825 765546

ISLE OF MAN

Dr Peter Duncan
DEFA - Isle of Man Government
01624 685835 (main)
Marine Operations Centre
01624 686628 (24hrs)

SCOTLAND

DEAD STRANDINGS
Nick Davison, Scottish Marine Animal Strandings Scheme (SMASS)
07979 245893
reports@strandings.org
LIVE STRANDINGS/ ENTANGLEMENTS
SSPCA 03000 999999

NORTHERN IRELAND

ALL RECORDS
DAERA Marine Wildlife Team.
Marine.Wildlife@daera-ni.gov.uk

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

ALL RECORDS
Dr Tom Doyle
School of Biological, Earth & Environmental Sciences,
University College Cork
00353 (0) 87 1354938 (24hrs)

Report online at: www.euroturtle.org/turtlecode & www.mcsuk.org

RECORD THE FOLLOWING DETAILS

All information is valuable, but the following details are particularly useful:

- A description** of the turtle (alive or dead), identification of species (at least to leatherback/hard-shelled level) and overall straight length. Note any damage (e.g. cuts, scars) and **take photographs** when possible.
 - Location** (longitude & latitude/ OS grid reference), **date** and **time** of sighting.
 - Other observations**, such as turtle's behaviour, whether caught in fishing gear (including exact nature of entanglement, gear involved) etc.
 - Presence of tags**. Many conservation projects place plastic or metal tags on turtles' flippers, which display identification numbers and a return address. Record any tag details if this can be done without causing disturbance to the turtle.
- Please report all dead turtles, even if they have to be discarded at sea. Records from diaries or logbooks, however old, are also of interest.**

WHAT TO DO IF YOU FIND A SICK OR ENTANGLED TURTLE

Immediately report the turtle to the relevant contact. Marine turtles will drown if trapped underwater, but prompt action can save them. A turtle that is entangled or trapped is likely to be stressed. Large turtles deliver a serious bite and a blow from a flipper can be painful, so be careful. Due to possible health risks involved in handling turtles, always wear rubber gloves.

TURTLES ENTANGLED AT SEA

Approach calmly and cautiously and ensure first of all that the turtle's head is above water so that it can breathe if it is alive.

ALIVE: AVOID TOWING TURTLES TO SHORE. They should be disentangled and released at sea whenever possible.

If alert & active

- Do not use a gaff to pull the turtle alongside and do not haul leatherbacks aboard.
- Avoid pulling hard on the turtle's flippers as they may dislocate or break.
- Carefully disentangle the turtle, making sure that as much net and line as possible has been removed before the animal is released.
- Make sure that the vessel is stopped and out of gear before carefully sliding the turtle back into the water.
- Ensure that the turtle is clear of the vessel before moving away.

ONLY if disentanglement at sea is impossible should the turtle be brought ashore.

Tow leatherbacks very slowly and make sure the animal's head is above water so that it can breathe. Release leatherbacks in shallow water, not on land. Other species should be retained and reported.

If traumatised/inactive

(no or slight movement, limbs flexible and limp, no decomposition)

Severely traumatised hard-shelled turtles can be saved if they are small enough to fit on your boat.

- Wrap the turtle in a dry towel or blanket. Do not cover the nostrils.
- Place the animal in a sheltered and secure place on its belly. To drain the lungs, raise the back end of the shell so the turtle is resting at approximately 30°. Keep it in this position until you return to shore.
- Leatherbacks should **not** be hauled aboard. If inactive, they can be towed to shore very slowly, ensuring they are able to breathe at all times.

DEAD: There may be serious health risks involved in handling dead turtles.

Inexperienced individuals are advised not to touch them. Where possible, record the details listed above and, only if the specimen is fresh, bring it back to shore and place in cold storage. Always wear rubber gloves when handling turtles.

TURTLES STRANDED ON LAND

Leatherback turtles

Leatherbacks found stranded on beaches are usually very weak, dead or dying, but might still be saved.

If apparently uninjured:

- Carefully drag the turtle back to the sea and release it (enlist the help of several people and pull the shell rather than the flippers).
- Do not drag the animal over rocks, as this will cause severe damage.
- If stranded on rocks, it may be better to wait for the incoming tide to provide some buoyancy before dragging the turtle back to sea.

Other species (hard-shelled)

Loggerhead, Kemp's ridley, green and hawksbill turtles encountered on UK shores are usually cold stunned juveniles and should not be placed back in the sea.

- Wrap the turtle in a dry towel, do not cover the nostrils
- Place the animal in a sheltered and secure place on its belly. If inactive, raise the back end of the shell so the turtle is resting at approximately 30° to drain the lungs. Report the turtle as soon as possible.

Dead turtles of all species are valuable for research and should be reported as soon as possible. Fresh specimens should be preserved in a cold store where possible. These animals will undergo a full post-mortem examination within the DEFRA-funded UK Cetacean Strandings Investigation Project (CSIP).

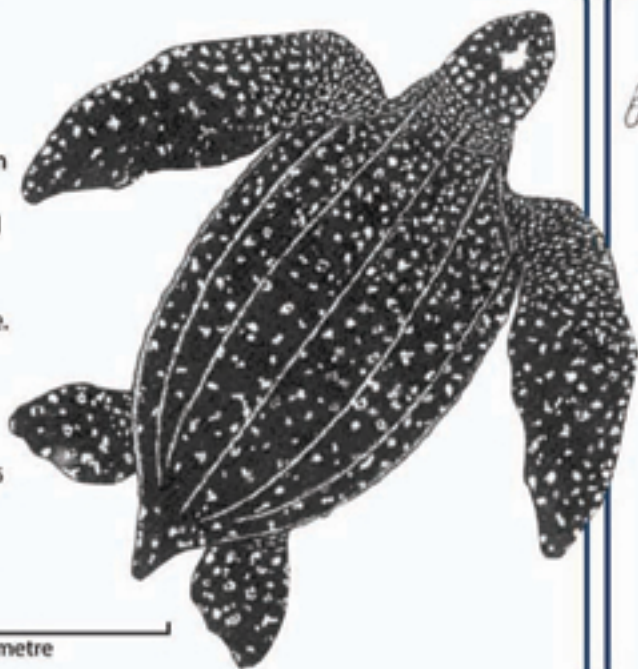
Endorsed by:



Of the world's seven marine turtle species, six have been recorded in UK waters. They are the leatherback, loggerhead, Kemp's ridley, olive ridley, green and hawksbill turtles. The leatherback, the largest marine turtle, is the species most frequently recorded in UK waters. Leatherbacks have a flexible, leathery shell and are unique among reptiles in that they are able to metabolically raise their body temperature above that of their immediate environment, allowing them to survive in colder waters. Each summer leatherbacks migrate to UK waters where they feed on jellyfish. The other five species have hard shells and are less frequently encountered in UK waters, where they usually occur as stray juveniles carried by currents from warmer seas.

LEATHERBACK TURTLE

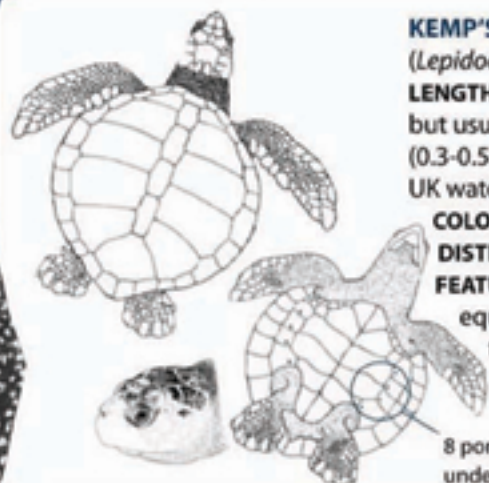
(*Dermochelys coriacea*)
Most frequently recorded species in UK waters.
LENGTH: up to 2.91 metres.
COLOUR: black, spotted with white.
DISTINCTIVE FEATURES: large, up to 916 kg, pronounced longitudinal ridges on shell, which tapers to a blunt spike.



SCALE 1 metre

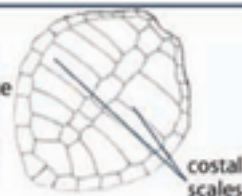
KEMP'S RIDLEY TURTLE

(*Lepidochelys kempii*)
LENGTH: up to 1 metre, but usually juveniles (0.3-0.5 metres) occur in UK waters.
COLOUR: grey/olive.
DISTINCTIVE FEATURES: shell width equal to or greater than shell length.



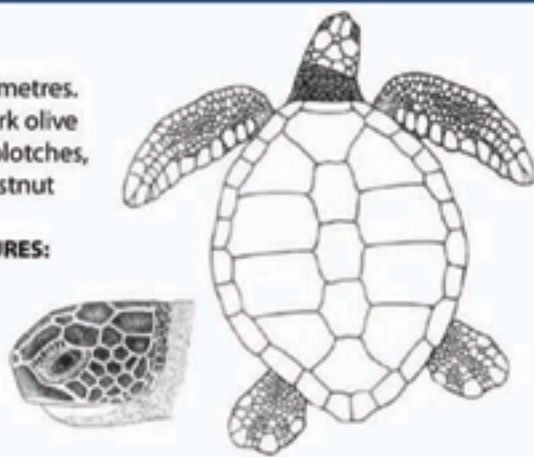
8 pores visible on underside (4 either side)

NB: The olive ridley turtle (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) occurs in the Atlantic, but has been recorded only once in UK waters to date. Similar to Kemp's ridley with 8 pores on underside, but has 5-9 pairs of costal scales on shell.



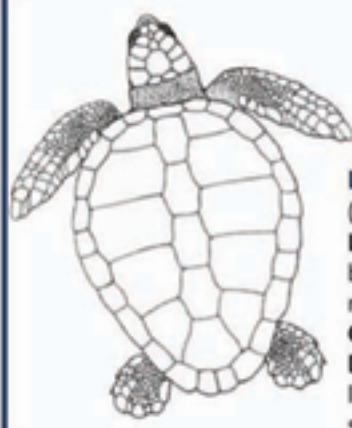
GREEN TURTLE

(*Chelonia mydas*)
LENGTH: up to 1.5 metres.
COLOUR: adults dark olive or grey with dark blotches, juveniles have chestnut coloured shell.
DISTINCTIVE FEATURES: smooth shell, rounded facial profile (not angular).



LOGGERHEAD TURTLE

(*Caretta caretta*)
LENGTH: adults up to 1.5 metres, but usually juveniles (0.3-0.5 metres) occur in UK waters.
COLOUR: reddish brown.
DISTINCTIVE FEATURES: large head, juveniles have small spikes along spine of shell.



HAWKBILL TURTLE

(*Eretmochelys imbricata*)
LENGTH: up to 1.2 metres.
COLOUR: brown, amber and black tortoiseshell pattern.
DISTINCTIVE FEATURES: shell scales overlapping, narrow tapered head with bird-like beak. Largely tropical distribution, rarely encountered in UK waters.



MARINE TURTLES ARE THREATENED

In UK waters threats include:

- **Accidental entanglement in fishing gear.** Although turtles can dive to great depths, they become stressed and drown when trapped underwater by fishing gear. Fishing gear discarded at sea may also entangle and kill turtles.
 - **Marine litter,** especially plastic, which turtles mistake for jellyfish. Once ingested, plastic can block a turtle's gut leading to starvation.
 - **Boat collisions.** Turtles often bask and must surface regularly to breathe, leaving them vulnerable to boat strike.
- PLEASE BE VIGILANT, AND DO NOT DISCARD FISHING GEAR OR LITTER AT SEA.**