

Special Agents

Volunteers help keep beaches clean and protect turtles at Myrtle Beach State Park

By Miriam Porter



Photo by Ann Malys Wilson

My son Noah and I love Myrtle Beach. We keep returning for the glorious sunrises, leisurely walks along the boardwalk, the twirling SkyWheel and the kind, southern charm of the locals. However, on our last trip, we decided we wanted to help the sea turtle population.

Although it may seem obvious to some travellers, sadly not everyone cleans up their trash. This puts wildlife in danger, especially sea turtles. Many beaches in the southern United States protect turtles, including South Carolina, whose state reptile is the loggerhead sea turtle.

Myrtle Beach State Park (myrtlebeachsp.com) is located along the Grand Strand coastline, between the maritime forest and the stunning Atlantic Ocean. During the summer months, visitors (over one million annually) and locals participate in sea turtle crawls and crucial conservation efforts.

My tween loves sleeping in, but gets up early to talk turtles with interpretive park ranger Ann Malys Wilson shortly after sunrise. Decked out in an official uniform, Ann, a 23-year veteran of the state park, warmly welcomes us. She pulls out a tiny white ball the size of a turtle egg and an adorable replica turtle to show us.

Noah is full of questions. "How long do they live? How many eggs do they lay? How do they even get to the ocean?"

Ann works with a dedicated team of volunteers, patrolling the beach each morning from mid-May to mid-August in search of turtle tracks (crawls). These crawls help volunteers and rangers determine where the eggs were laid the night before and if they need moving.

According to the Sea Turtle Nest Monitoring System (seaturtle.org), this year there were over 5,000 nests in South Carolina—1,444 of those were relocated. If a nest is below the high tide line, it must be relocated to safety on the sand dune.

Ann compares turtle nest hatching to the boiling over of a volcano and says that natural dangers for baby turtles include ghost crabs, birds, foxes and raccoons. Time is of the essence for struggling hatchlings crawling towards the ocean. Litter, sand holes and castles are obstacles for turtles putting their lives at risk.

Becky Billingsley has been an official volunteer at the State Park since 2013. "We volunteers are patient folk," she says. "We walk, we wait and we rejoice over every hatched egg."

We follow Ann towards sectioned-off nests with bright orange signs and protected screens. She casually picks up litter along the way. "You can help sea turtles without ever meeting one," she says, as she tosses tiny bottle caps, wrappers and cigarette butts into trash bins. Petroleum-based plastic bags are not biodegradable and sea turtles can mistake all forms of plastic and garbage as food and ingest it, leading to their death.

"We get one million visitors a year. If every person picks up one piece of trash, imagine the positive impact that will have," Ann continues. "No matter what beach you go to, you will have a positive impact doing small, helpful things."

With that in mind, Noah and I put on gloves and start picking up trash. I am amazed at how many cigarette butts I find. My bag of garbage stinks like stale smoke and pollution. The beach is patrolled often, so this litter is most likely from the night before. I can't imagine what beaches would be like without volunteers to keep the earth clean and safe for wildlife.

"The downside of this volunteer gig is the heartbreak I feel over how other people don't take care of our beaches," says Billingsley.

If you want to join park rangers on sea turtle patrol, the missions start again on Fridays in June, 2018. Of course picking up litter and keeping our precious earth clean is something you can do all year round, regardless where your travels take you.



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A few sea turtle facts

- Loggerhead turtles have huge heads and reddish-brown shells.
- They are the most abundant of all marine turtle species in U.S. waters.
- Loggerheads can move through the water at speeds of up to 24 km/h.
- In South Carolina turtles lay an average of 115 eggs.
- It takes approximately 55 to 60 days for baby turtles to hatch. This typically happens at night when it's cooler.
- The hatch success rate in South Carolina is 66 per cent.
- The life span of a sea turtle in the wild can be as long as a century.