

never came

Famous turtle mom due for return

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one big request: Leave the turtles alone.

It's spring, and an old turtle's thoughts turn to romance. Not young turtles — green sea turtles don't reach breeding age until they are 20 years old or older.

Turtle fanciers are expecting and hoping that "Maui Girl" — officially turtle 5690 — will return several times this season to nest in Lahaina, which she has done every other year since 2000. A number of other turtles, none with a name, are also likely to visit Maui's beaches in about a month, according to Cheryl King, research coordinator of the Hawaii Wildlife Fund, which helps monitor nests.

Finding the nests can be a life-and-death matter for baby turtles. Last year, a previously unknown hawksbill laid a nest in front of the Maui Lu, but nobody noticed.

The babies, misled by street lights, crawled onto South Kihei Road.

"(They) were squashed," King said. "It was pretty traumatic."

HWF volunteers and professional wildlife biologists were alerted and managed to save some nestlings. The same turtle also had made two nests at Kealia Pond National Wildlife Refuge. Those were spotted and hatched out successfully.

Glynnis Nakai, manager of the refuge, will announce soon a meeting to organize this year's Dawn Patrol, a volunteer watch that monitors three South Maui beaches for signs of nesting by the critically endangered hawksbills.

Monitoring is good, but the turtles don't need help to nest.

Later in the year, researchers (usually Nakai and Skippy Hau of the Department of Land and Natural Resources) return to the nests and excavate them. Sometimes they are able to free a few stragglers who were tangled in roots. In every case, they take samples of DNA from dead hatchlings or from eggs, building up a genetic data bank that Balazs said will be valuable to researchers in the future.

For example, with Maui Girl, the first green sea turtle known to have nested in Lahaina in 50 years, the genetic data will allow researchers someday to tease out the relationships among her grandchildren.

Every other year, she has deposited hundreds of eggs, and by now, Balazs said in a telephone interview Friday, she must have more than a thousand offspring. Many, many will have fallen prey to the enemies of turtles, but once a turtle reaches maturity, the chance of a long and reproductive life stretches ahead of her. Balazs says that "if she is still with us," he is confident 5690 will be visiting Lahaina again this year.

Most of Maui Girl's nests have been in the neighborhood of Lahaina Shores. The presence of so many humans and even of dogs on the beach has proved not to deter her. And once a turtle finds a beach she likes, she often comes back again and again.



CHERYL KING photo

A baby hawksbill sea turtle finds itself stuck in a footprint in this 2008 photo. Starting next month, volunteers will start a Dawn Patrol to monitor Maui beaches for turtle nests.

said, is that the metal tag attached to her flipper when she was released as a seven-pound, dinner-plate-size adolescent in 1981 stayed in place for 20 years to be read again. Nowadays, researchers place chips under the skin of turtles, which they hope will allow for more reliable tracking.

Other researchers have proved that released captive turtles have survived to reproduce, such as Kemp's ridley turtles released on Padre Island, Texas. But in Hawaii, only Maui Girl proves that human intervention has worked for the benefit of the turtles.

"She's an ambassador for the species, she's Maui's turtle," he said.

eral public and for marine-activity operators to provide the latest knowledge and interpretive skills to understand and explain the ocean environment.

Register at www.oceanawarehawaii.org or by calling Tracy Burke at 879-2818, ext 28.

The Kihei course will be held at the whale sanctuary, 726 S. Kihei Road, beginning May 3 and continuing Mondays and Wednesdays, through May 19.

The Lahaina course will be at Waiola Church, 535 Wainee St., beginning May 4 and continuing Tuesdays and Thursdays, through May 20.

King said more volunteers always can be used, because it would be desirable to expand the patrol to more than three beaches. It would be impossible, she said, to monitor them all.

Once a nest is spotted, usually by early-morning walkers who see tracks in the sand, even more volunteers are needed to watch over the nests. This work, in the middle of the night, involves sleeplessness and mosquitoes and dedication.

George Balazs, who leads the green sea turtle program at the National Marine Fisheries laboratory in Honolulu, has

The special thing about Maui Girl is that she is the first captive-reared Hawaiian green sea turtle known for certain to have grown to maturity and started reproducing. But Balazs strongly suspects there are others.

For example, Sea Life Park, which has a captive breeding program, releases its surplus babies near its aquarium on Oahu, and for several years now a green turtle has been nesting right there or on nearby Rabbit Island. He cannot prove it, but Balazs suspects it's one of the extra babies the park released years ago.

The miracle of 5690, he

To join the 160 volunteers who volunteered last year and sign up for Dawn Patrol, visit www.wildhawaii.org.

If you encounter a turtle emergency, like the one at the Maui Lu last year, call King at 385-5464.

If you would like to learn more about turtles, the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary will present free Ocean Awareness Training courses in May. This six-part course includes a session on sea turtles.

Graduates of the course can earn a CORAL (Care of Our Culture, Ocean, Reefs and Animal Life) certification card. The course is for both the gen-

All sessions will be from 6:30 to 8 p.m. Space is limited.

Trainers will include Darla White of DLNR's Eyes of the Reef, Hannah Bernard of Maui Reef Fund, invertebrate specialist Pauline Fiene, Liz Foot of Project S.E.A.-Link, John Mitchell of Digital Bus, and Alastair Hebard of the whale sanctuary.

The CORAL certification also will help participants meet the requirements for volunteer positions as a sanctuary docent and other islandwide volunteer programs where volunteers assist certified professional guides and owners.

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