

RARE TURTLES RESCUED IN KA'U



A rare nest of olive ridley sea turtles was discovered last week at Kawa. JEREMY VAN ARKEL/COURTESY PHOTO

NEST OF OLIVE RIDLEYS FOUND BY OCEAN VIEW FAMILY

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A rare nest of olive ridley sea turtles was discovered last week in Ka'u.

Jeremy, Jen and Kian Van Arkel of Ocean View initially found six or seven hatchlings stuck in rocks and driftwood debris on the beach in Kawa on Feb. 3.

The family called the University of Hawaii at Hilo Marine Option Program Sea Turtle Response hotline after their discovery. That call was directed to team coordinator Jen Sims, who helped coordinate the response effort.

Sims didn't quite believe it.

"At first, I said, 'No, there can't be hatchlings,'" she said by phone Monday.

Sims said the only sea turtle species that nests on the Big Island is the hawksbill, and those turtles typically nest between May and November.

A few green sea turtles also have nested here, but most travel to the northwest Hawaiian Islands to lay their eggs between May to August, she said.

Those hatchlings, though, look different from the photos the family provided.

"I knew it was something rare, right off the bat ...," Sims said. "I certainly didn't know they were olive ridleys, and I've never seen an olive ridley nest nor hatchlings before. So when I saw

the pictures, I knew they didn't look right, but I didn't personally know what they were."

Lauren Kurpita, former director of the Hawaii Island Hawksbill Project, advised that the hatchlings should be carefully moved closer to the water if they were unable to navigate through the debris.

The Van Arkel family then spent several hours ensuring the safety of the turtles by combing through the debris, locating any stranded hatchlings, and moving them further down the beach.

The Van Arkels released approximately 20 turtles, and said the encounter with the turtles was a "once in a lifetime experience" that they won't forget.

As the family assisted the baby sea turtles that had moved toward the ocean, more hatchlings started to emerge from the nest.

Kurpita, who arrived on the scene nearly three hours later, was able to excavate the nest, unearthing three dozen more sea turtles trapped by rocks.

Olive ridley sea turtles are a "threatened" species under the United States Endangered Species Act.

Although they are known to inhabit Hawaiian waters, Sims said most olive ridleys in the Pacific Ocean nest in Central America in an "arribada," where the females nest at

the same time.

Solitary nesting events are much more rare, she said.

"And the fact that this turtle nested in Hawaii instead of its normal nesting spot is really unusual," Sims said. "We just don't see it here. ... (It's) just kind of extraordinary. When you do sea turtle work like we do, we get really excited when we see a species we've never seen before."

According to records, the nest discovered last week was only the seventh known olive ridley nest in the Hawaiian Islands, and the third found on the Big Island.

One nest was found in Hilo in the early 2000s and the other on Maui in 2010.

Sims said the turtles are known to be in Hawaiian waters, but typically feed in deep water, "way off shore."

"I was shocked and so excited," Sims said. "This is one of those rare events."

The presence of a sea turtle nest is notable since driving has been limited on the beach at Kawa after Hawaii County acquired ownership and Na Mamo o Kawa began land stewardship of the area.

Sims was thankful for the work of the Van Arkel family, and said their effort "speaks to the aloha spirit we have. We take care of the island together and all the species that are here together, and I really appreciate (that)."