

Marine Turtle Newsletter

First Report of a Loggerhead Sea Turtle From Alaska

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A juvenile female loggerhead turtle, *Caretta caretta*, was found dead at the water's edge in a deep inlet on the north end of Shuyak Island, Alaska (58°33.9'N, 152°32.2'W) on 31 December 1991. It was towed by canoe to a Shuyak island residence and later transported to Kodiak by plane, where it was deposited in the freezer of the Office of Enforcement, National Marine Fisheries Service, until turned over to Kodiak College for study in early February. Kodiak weather was at or below freezing for most of the time that the turtle was not in a freezer. Identification was based on five pair of lateral scutes (the anteriormost contacting the nuchal scute), three pair of enlarged inframarginal scutes, the reddish-brown carapace, and the yellowish plastron. Morphometrics (Table 1) were obtained after Pritchard et al. (1983). The turtle weighed 37.8 kg.

The turtle was examined in detail to search for answers regarding its appearance in Alaska and cause of death. Encrusting barnacles were not present on either the carapace or the plastron. The outer margin of the left post-central scute had been broken and partially regenerated. The head and neck were missing above the fifth cervical vertebra. The hyoid bone and cartilage were missing as were the anterior portions of the esophagus and trachea. The respiratory and digestive systems were intact. Stomach, intestines, liver and gall bladder were examined for parasites and other anomalies but none were noted. The six-meter long stomach and intestinal tract contained a thick, viscous fecal material which tested negative for oily hydrocarbons with a black light. Embedded in the dark mass were five pieces of firm material about 50 mm long and 10 mm in diameter resembling the stipe of *Laminaria*. There was also an irregularly shaped piece of hard plastic (2 mm thick), about 200 mm² in area. Many small bird feathers (5-10 mm long) were collected from the gut.

There was much fatty tissue around the organs indicating that the animal was well nourished prior to its death. The fat was bright yellow and appeared fresh. The internal musculature was pink to red, appeared fresh and little disturbed except at the areas around the neck and rear leg. In general the flesh of the turtle appeared to be fit to eat, thus indicating that it had not been dead long or it had been frozen soon after death. The heart and pericardial chamber appeared intact. The female reproductive tract was small and the ovary was little developed. A large opening was present in the skin between the inguinal and anal scutes exposing the femur; actual bone was seen where muscles were missing. It is hoped that an environmental laboratory can make an analysis of the gut contents to verify if the material is hydrocarbon contaminants or the natural fecal contents of the turtle.

Table 1. Straight-line measurements from a stranded loggerhead sea turtle (1) in Alaska.

Description	Length (mm)
carapace:	
width	613
standard length	642
total [maximum] length	725

minimum length	587
posterior margin to tip of tail	-5
plastron:	
intergular scute length	91
humeral scute length	80
axillary scute length	64
pectoral scute length	85
abdominal scute length	97
femoral scute length	65
anal scute length	83
miscellaneous:	
mid-vent to tip of tail	40
mid-vent to posterior margin of carapace	52.6

1 photo-documentation was provided to the Editors, confirming species identification.

Pritchard, P., P. Bacon, F. Berry, A. Carr, J. Fletemeyer, R. Gallagher, S. Hopkins, R. Lankford, R. Márquez M., L. Ogren, W. Pringle, Jr., H. Reichart, and R. Witham. 1983. Manual of Sea Turtle Research and Conservation Techniques, second edition (K. Bjorndal and G. Balazs, Editors). Ctr for Environmental Education, Washington D. C.