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**NEWS | LOS ANGELES**

# **An endangered sea species is thriving in an urban SoCal river**

The San Gabriel River near Long Beach is the northernmost habitat for Pacific green sea turtles



A view of the San Gabriel River in Seal Beach, Calif., on Aug. 20, 2025.  
Jessie Alcheh/SFGATE

By **Erin Rode**, *Contributing LA Outdoors Editor*  
Aug 23, 2025





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**An endangered sea species is thriving in an urban SoCal river**

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I'd watched the viral Instagram videos of the sea turtles, I'd read a report monitoring their habitat and I'd even heard from a friend who recently saw the turtles with her own eyes.



Still, the first time I witnessed the head of a large green sea turtle bob up for air from the channelized San Gabriel River, behind a complex of apartment buildings and with power plants smoking in the distance, I was hit with a wave of surprise.

The endangered species has been a permanent presence in the river, which empties into the ocean between Seal Beach and Long Beach, since at least 2008, when volunteers with the Aquarium of the Pacific first recorded that the sea turtles lived in the river year-round. It's an unusual location to find the creatures, to say the least. The San Gabriel River now represents the northernmost habitat occupied by the Pacific green sea turtles anywhere in the eastern Pacific Ocean; before their discovery, the next closest population was believed to be 120 miles south near San Diego.

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But even after over a decade, the sight of wildlife thriving in a seemingly unlikely place still sparks joy and surprise.



A sign by the San Gabriel River in Seal Beach, Calif., on Aug. 20, 2025.  
Jessie Alcheh/SFGATE



A view of the San Gabriel River in Seal Beach, Calif., on Aug. 20, 2025.  
Jessie Alcheh/SFGATE



A turtle swims in the San Gabriel River in Seal Beach, Calif., on Aug. 20, 2025.  
Jessie Alcheh/SFGATE

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Every once in a while, a video of the sea turtles goes viral, introducing a new mass of people to the unexpected sea turtle habitat. “Not believing this,” one user wrote under a recent TikTok video of the turtles. “There’s no way these turtles are in the San Gabriel River,” wrote another.

But it's true, said Cassandra Davis, the volunteer services director at the Aquarium of the Pacific, which manages a volunteer sea turtle monitoring project. An estimated 100 endangered sea turtles call the San Gabriel River home, feeding off eelgrass and mostly staying near the mouth of the river, where there's a steady influx of saltwater, but occasionally venturing farther up the river channel into freshwater to munch on algae.

Along with the Los Angeles River, the San Gabriel River is one of the major rivers coursing through Los Angeles County, stretching 60 miles from its origin in the San Gabriel Mountains through over a dozen cities until it reaches the Pacific Ocean. The river forms part of the border between Los Angeles and Orange counties. Both rivers historically ran across alluvial flood plains, expanding and shrinking in size and frequently flooding their banks and changing course. Following historic flooding in 1938, officials encased both rivers in concrete channels.

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A view of the San Gabriel River in Seal Beach, Calif., on Aug. 20, 2025.  
Jessie Alcheh/SFGATE

Today, the San Gabriel River courses through densely populated suburbs, running roughly parallel to the traffic-packed Interstate 605 for much of the route. The last mile or two near the mouth of the

river, where the sea turtles have made a home, is now lined with apartment buildings, a mobile home park, breweries, restaurants and power plants.

Finding sea turtles in such a dense urban environment may seem surprising at first, but the mouth of the San Gabriel River is actually a natural habitat choice for the species, Davis said,

“Historically, this area would have been all wetland habitat where the green sea turtles thrive,” said Davis, who added that the “unique part” is how the turtles are in the area year-round instead of being a transient population. “It turns out that they’re here all year, they’re a resident population and they are thriving in the lower San Gabriel River area and the nearby wetlands.”

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A view of a green sea turtle.  
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The sea turtle habitat is channelized and bound by concrete levees, but the bottom of the river is soft and natural, and the turtles are still in a saltwater area with tidal influence, Davis said. A 2023 study that analyzed nine years of citizen science monitoring data found that areas along a 1.5-mile

stretch of the river near the Los Cerritos wetlands and power plants were the most popular areas for the sea turtle river residents. The report hypothesized “that turtles are attracted to these areas of the river for forage opportunity and thermal refuge.”

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The warm water effluent from the power plants “almost mimics the warmer water you would find in shallower pools in the wetlands themselves,” Davis said. And the “small but expanding” Los Cerritos wetlands restoration project provides additional habitat space.

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While the sea turtles call the San Gabriel River their permanent home, they don't nest in the river. Instead, the turtles venture far south to nesting beaches in Michoacán, Mexico. After hatching, the turtles travel about 3,000 miles to reach their urban river home, and then each turtle likely travels back to nest once they reach adulthood.

"[The sea turtles] are a great reminder that there is nature that is accessible, and we can create spaces that are better for people and animals," Davis said. "California has lost about 99% of our wetlands, so these wetland restoration projects create amazing places that people like to go and visit, and they create these incredible habitats for animals like sea turtles."

Aug 23, 2025



**Erin Rode**

CONTRIBUTING LA OUTDOORS EDITOR



Erin Rode is SFGATE's Contributing Los Angeles Outdoors Editor. Erin grew up in Los Angeles County and has hiked area trails for over a decade. She previously covered the environment for The Desert Sun in Palm Springs.