



SCIENCE & MEDICINE

Sea turtles laying eggs at Huntington Beach and Seal Beach are first known cases of nesting on West Coast



An olive ridley sea turtle was observed on the beach near the Huntington Beach Pier. Officials will monitor her nest, which has been fenced off. (City of Huntington Beach)



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The turtle crawled out of the sea on Sept. 16 and made her way to a patch of sand between the waves and the oceanfront condos on Surfside Avenue in Seal Beach.

The olive ridley sea turtle dug a pit in the sand and deposited a clutch of eggs. Then she was gone back into the sea, leaving behind stunned lifeguards and the first known natural sea turtle nest on the U.S. West Coast.

Then three days later, about eight miles down the beach, a second turtle sighting. Just south of Tower 15 in Huntington Beach, another olive ridley clambered onto shore. She cleared a hole in the sand, laid her eggs and slipped back into the ocean.

But their appearances in front of surprised Southern California beachgoers is a historic first, in an era when the climate is regularly surprising even those who know it best.

“I have been expecting to see subtropical species present off the coast of Southern California, which is typical during El Niños,” said Lindsey Peavey Reeves, a senior scientist with the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation who has studied olive ridleys in the eastern Pacific Ocean for 20 years. “However, I wasn’t expecting to see olive ridley sea turtles nesting in Orange County.”



Eggs from an olive ridley sea turtle were laid near Seal Beach. (City of Huntington Beach)

The turtles are normally found throughout tropical regions of the Pacific, Indian and Atlantic oceans, with large nesting populations in Mexico, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama.

Upon receiving reports of the turtle sightings, Huntington Beach Fire Department Marine Safety called in the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Wildlife officials erected small mesh huts around each nest. A wider cordon at both sites keeps the public at a safe distance. The nests will remain fenced and monitored throughout the incubation period, which is typically 45 to 60 days, NOAA said.

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After that, the hatchlings will crawl to the ocean, where they will become the first known sea turtles to start their lives in California waters.

Among the smaller of sea turtle species, the olive ridley can grow up to 3 feet long and 100 pounds. It has a heart-shaped, olive-colored shell.

While it is listed as a threatened animal under the Endangered Species Act, the olive ridley is one of the more abundant sea turtles.

Before last week, the farthest known northern nesting ground was in the Mexican state of Baja California Sur, Peavey Reeves said.

“While I wasn’t expecting this nesting event, it’s not outlandish for olive ridley nesting to continue to shift northward as both ocean water temperatures and sand temperatures increase, and some of their usual nesting beaches erode away during periods of strong storms,” Peavey Reeves said.

They are just one of [countless species around the globe](#) shifting habitats as oceans warm and the climate changes. On Aug. 22, the global average sea-surface temperature measured a [record-breaking 70 degrees](#), the highest recorded since March 2024.

In California, where the latest El Niño is predicted to be [one of the strongest ever recorded](#) and [an extreme marine heat wave](#) has disrupted life in the sea and on land, the turtles are just one of the latest signs of climate change.



Two Orange County beaches have sections blocked from the public after sea turtle nests were discovered. Above, Huntington Beach. (Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times)

It's not clear what will happen to the hatchlings that make it to the ocean. Survival rates for all sea turtle species are very low in the early stages of life.

It's also not clear if this is a one-off occurrence, or if Orange County beaches may start to see more of these nests in future seasons. Olive ridleys lay eggs both in massive colonies — one nesting beach in La Escobilla, Mexico, hosts an estimated 450,000 nesting female turtles, [according to NOAA](#) — and in solitary locales.

“They’re very flexible and adaptable,” said Pamela Plotkin, a retired oceanography professor at Texas A&M University.

“They can sort of go with the flow, if you want to put it in human terms,” she added.

“They take advantage of opportunities that many other sea turtles don’t have the

capability of doing. They feed on lots of different things out in deep waters, and so they are not tied to just one type of food like some turtles are.”

Last week’s turtles could be the first of many.

“Is this the first girl who is coming up to start putting her eggs in California, and maybe others will follow, and it’ll become a thing, or is this just a one-off?” Plotkin said. “I think time will tell.”

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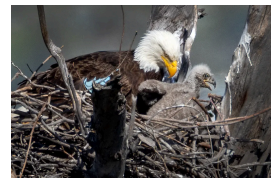
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