

Leathery turtle sightings increase

One of the world's most endangered turtle species, the Leathery turtle, has been sighted on several occasions recently in waters off the south-west of Western Australia.

Although the Leathery turtle is a noted long-distance sea voyager and has been recorded in most Australian waters the species appears to favour the warmer waters of the temperate zone and the tropics where it also breeds. However, between November 1981 and January 1982 there were four sightings of the turtle between Fremantle and Cape Naturaliste.

Two of the sightings were in November, one in December and another one in January. Unfortunately, two of the turtles were dead. The first was found entangled in a trawl net about one kilometre north of Bunkers Bay near Cape Naturaliste by a professional fisherman. The carcass was subsequently offered to a local museum for display and a fibreglass replica was to be made of the turtle for this purpose.

About the same time, a report was received from another professional fisherman saying he had freed a Leathery turtle from a tangle of rope and floats belonging to his rock lobster pots which were then set off Fremantle. The fisherman said the turtle was quite large and, when released, swam away without displaying any obvious injury.

In December, research officers from the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife were called to examine the carcass of a large turtle which was found washed up on the beach just north of Fremantle. Although badly decomposed, the turtle was readily identified as a Leathery turtle of about 1.8m in length.

The fourth sighting was made at the end of January by two men fishing from a boat anchored in Geographe Bay near Busselton. According to the men the turtle swam up to the boat and touched it before swimming away on the surface. The sea was calm and at the time the men

were able to easily identify the turtle as a Leathery turtle about two metres in length.

It would be very difficult to confuse an adult Leathery turtle with any other turtle species, even for an amateur. Besides the distinctive shape of its carapace or shell which, in the Leathery turtle, is tapered toward the tail whereas most other turtles have oval-shaped carapaces, the Leathery turtle also has very characteristic longitudinal ridges along its carapace. These ridges are not found on any other species of adult turtle.

The leathery turtle is also one of the largest turtles in the world, growing to a length of about two metres and a maximum weight up to 550kg. Another readily distinguishing feature about the species is its smooth, relatively scaleless skin which is black, sometimes spotted with white. Its front flippers lack the claws of other sea turtles and

are proportionately much larger and more powerful.

The turtle nests on tropical beaches throughout the world although few nests have been recorded in Australia. The few that have been observed have all been located within a single 100km strip of coast near Bundaberg in Queensland.

The Leathery turtle is believed to feed mainly on jellyfish, small crustaceans and algae.

The photograph of the Leathery turtle below was taken by Dr Colin Limpus of the Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service. Dr Limpus is engaged in studies on marine turtles and he would welcome information on the occurrence of Leathery turtles along the Western Australian coast. Any readers who have information on sightings of the Leathery turtle are asked to contact their local office of the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife so that the necessary information may be recorded and sent to Dr Limpus.

▼ A Leathery turtle laying her eggs on a Queensland beach. (Photo C. Limpus)

