



THE DEADLY Bucket

By ESTHER HORVATH

Where Cape Cod juts into the Atlantic Ocean from the east coast of the United States, it forms Cape Cod Bay and the southern end of Massachusetts Bay. The area, which bears the grim moniker “the Deadly Bucket,” is the site of the world’s largest recurring sea turtle stranding phenomenon. Each year, primarily between October and January, hundreds of mostly juvenile turtles wash ashore weak and often dead as a result of cold stunning. Cold stunning is the state that turtles enter when they are exposed to cold water for a prolonged period—characterized by a slowed heart rate, decreased circulation, and lethargy that can lead to shock, pneumonia, and even death. Of the afflicted turtles found in Cape Cod, 85 percent are young Kemp’s ridleys, which are considered critically endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

The staff of Massachusetts Audubon Society’s Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary has been rescuing stranded sea turtles on Cape Cod since the 1970s. Robert Prescott, the sanctuary’s director, began the project in 1974 after seeing his first stranded Kemp’s ridley. Today, sanctuary staff members and volunteers walk the beaches twice daily after high tide, searching for victims of cold stunning. “Our work is like a life-saving crew’s,” said Prescott. “If the turtle is alive, you have to go and get it. Each turtle counts. We never leave a live turtle on the beach, no matter what the conditions are.”

In 2014, more than 1,400 sea turtles were stranded in Cape Cod Bay, exceeding all records. In fall 2015, more than 580 turtles had already been rescued, and that number will increase as the cold season continues. According to Prescott, researchers still do not know the cause of the higher number of strandings, but it could be the result of an increase in the global population of Kemp’s ridleys.

Extreme weather is the main cause of the cold stunning and stranding. As the turtles attempt to migrate south to warmer waters, they become trapped in Cape Cod’s hook-shaped landmass. When water temperatures drop to 50 °F (10 °C), they become cold stunned (hypothermic) and immobilized at the surface. High winds, coupled with extreme tides, often push the turtles closer to shore, leaving them stranded when the tide falls.

Sanctuary staff members often report injuries such as entanglement in fishing lines and boat strikes, which may result from the turtles’

prolonged stunned condition. Once the sanctuary staff members find and rescue the stranded turtles, they transport them to the New England Aquarium in Boston. There the Marine Animal Rescue Team’s experts warm the turtles, treat their injuries, and rehabilitate them. The rescuers then release the survivors back into the ocean when the waters have warmed.

“We provide the highest quality care to sick or injured sea turtles with the goal of releasing every turtle back into the ocean,” says Connie Merigo, senior biologist of the Marine Animal Rescue Team. The team also sees its work as important for global education and conservation efforts. The team has successfully released 1,400 sea turtles in the past 20 years, about 1,200 of which were Kemp’s ridleys. ■

In 2014, members of the New England Aquarium Marine Animal Rescue Team release 31 rescued and rehabilitated sea turtles at Little Talbot Island in Florida, U.S.A. © ESTHER HORVATH