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Recommended Citation

Georgia Southern University, "Newsroom" (2018). *Newsroom*. 1504.
<https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/newsroom/1504>

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Georgia Southern researchers help build turtle population along Georgia coast

MAY 23, 2018

Save



Dozens of loggerhead sea turtle hatchlings make their way down the beach of St. Catherines Island into the Atlantic Ocean.

For 28 years, Georgia Southern University researchers and students have been helping turtles along the Georgia coast thrive and survive through the Georgia Southern University Sea Turtle Program at St. Catherines Island (STP@SCI).

The 2018 turtle season began in May and runs through October. With high numbers of turtle nests on the island in recent years, the Program has seen record numbers of sea turtle nests, leading to a positive outlook for this year's season.

"We have high expectations for the 2018 sea turtle season," said Jaynie Gaskin, co-director of the STP@SCI. "We had our highest number of nests in 2016 with 322 loggerhead sea turtle nests. Last year, in 2017, the whole Georgia coast had a slight decrease in number of nests, which is totally normal for sea turtle nesting demographics. Turtles will nest one season then take a year or two off before returning."

Although the 2017 season saw less overall turtle nests, researchers discovered a record number of green sea turtle nests on the island.

"Of the total 207 nests, 203 were our usual loggerhead sea turtle nests, and five were green sea turtle nests," said Gaskin. "This is the the most green sea turtle nests ever documented on the island during a single season. In mid-August, hatchlings began emerging from the first of these nests, which were the first green sea turtle hatchlings in the history of St. Catherines Island."

The Program is also expanding conservation and research efforts to include native diamondback terrapins nesting on the beaches of St. Catherines Island. Gaskin is working to develop and implement an effective conservation protocol for the terrapin nests.

"Diamondback terrapins are extremely elusive brackish water turtles that live in the salt marshes of coastal Georgia," she said. "Terrapins usually nest on high places in the marsh, but in the past three years, I have found nearly 100 nests on the beach."

In addition to benefiting the turtle populations along the coast, the Program provides Georgia Southern students with hands-on experience with conservation and research.

"Every year, two or more Georgia Southern students participate in the sea turtle program through a two-month long internship," Gaskin said. "During their time with the Program, interns are directly involved with several ongoing sea turtle research and conservation projects."

One of these projects is the STP@SCI's Gopher Tortoise Program. In 2017, Gaskin, her co-investigators and two student interns collaborated with researchers and conservationists from Georgia Southern, The Georgia Sea Turtle Center and The Savannah River Ecology Lab to revitalize the Program.

"During the summer, data were collected on more than 800 gopher tortoise burrows, more than double the number of burrows and tortoises expected to be on the island," she said. "In addition to mapping and marking burrows, researchers also assisted with health assessments of native tortoises, release of rehabilitated tortoises and soft-release of head-started juvenile tortoises."

In addition, the Program hosts 18 undergraduates for a 10-day, fully immersive field school on the island, where undergraduate students get hands-on research experience by attending lectures on a variety of topics, as well as independently conducting a conservation-related research project where they must collect and analyze data from the field, interpret the results and present their conclusions in a final presentation and paper.

Since its inception in 1990, more than 200,000 hatchlings from more than 4,000 nests have successfully made it to the sea with the help of participants in the Program. The Program focuses on conservation of nesting sea turtles on the Georgia coast, research into the nesting



One of the first-ever green sea turtle hatchlings on St. Catherines Island.



Georgia Southern students remove "straggler" sea turtle hatchlings stuck in a