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Leatherbacks Are Rare, So Boaters Must Take Care

Leatherback sea turtles, the world's largest reptiles, are hard to miss. That's a message NOAA's Fisheries Service is sending out to boaters in southeastern New England, particularly in Nantucket and Vineyard sounds, where leatherbacks have arrived in greater numbers than usual this year. Reports of dead, stranded or injured leatherbacks are also hitting record levels.

"We can't say for sure why so many leatherbacks are inshore this year, but for now boaters need to take extra care, watching for these guys and avoiding collisions with them," said Sara McNulty, NOAA sea turtle stranding coordinator in the northeast. Leatherback turtles are listed as endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act.

High time for leatherbacks in this area is typically from mid-July through September. This year, since mid-June aggregations of 10 to 40 animals have been routinely observed off Rhode Island, south of the Islands, and in shoal areas of Vineyard and Nantucket Sounds.

According to Karen Dourdeville, who collects sea turtle sighting reports for Massachusetts Audubon's Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary, nearly 100 sightings have been reported by boaters since June. "It's the most reports we've gotten in six years of running our sea turtle sightings hotline," she said. Almost all of this year's sightings are likely leatherbacks.

"Reports of dead and stranded leatherbacks have increased along with the number of sighting reports," said McNulty. "Many of these animals have slash wounds that are most likely from boat propellers." The U.S. Coast Guard is currently broadcasting regular reminders to boaters about using caution and reduced speeds in areas where leatherbacks are present.

To report a sea turtle sighting, call 1-888-SEA-TURT, or go online to <http://turtlelab.unh.edu/haveyouseenaleatherback.html>

Over the past few weeks, NOAA has made documenting both live and dead leatherbacks a priority. The agency's network of turtle conservation partners in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York, and Maine have been particularly focused on leatherbacks. Dead or stranded animals should be reported to NOAA or a stranding network partner. Karen Dourdeville's reports come through a hotline, established to collect live sea turtle sighting information from boaters and the general public. Researchers at the University of New Hampshire also have an online reporting system for collecting reports of live leatherbacks.

With the help of NOAA funding, Kara Dodge at the University of New Hampshire Large Pelagics Research Center is tracking the presence and movements of leatherbacks in New England waters. "We're observing more jellyfish inshore this year. That's the main prey for leatherbacks and our research indicates the leatherbacks are foraging here," she said. Working with commercial fishermen, Dodge and her colleagues at New England Aquarium and Provincetown Center for Coastal Studies have successfully applied satellite tags to seven leatherbacks this summer, the first ever satellite tagging of free-swimming leatherbacks in East Coast waters.

“Leatherbacks can also get entangled in fishing gear,” said McNulty, but she warns that people should not attempt to disentangle turtles themselves. “Call the disentanglement network, and stand by until responders arrive. It’s not easy to disentangle a turtle, there’s a risk of injury to both the turtle and the rescuer. Disentanglement responders will also gathering information about the entanglements, as well as freeing the animal.”

Leatherbacks spend a lot of time in the open ocean, and make long migrations. In the western North Atlantic they are known to range between the Caribbean and Canada, and are usually found off New England from late June through October. Adults can be more than six feet long and weigh up to a ton.

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On the Web:

More about leatherback sea turtles:

<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/species/turtles/leatherback.htm>

Report a dead or stranded sea turtle:

http://www.nero.noaa.gov/prot_res/stranding/ContactList.html

Report live leatherback sea turtle sighting:

<http://turtlelab.unh.edu/haveyouseenaleatherback.html>

Report an entangled sea turtle: http://www.nero.noaa.gov/prot_res/stranding/stdn.html

Northeast Sea Turtle Stranding and Disentanglement Program:

http://www.nero.noaa.gov/prot_res/stranding/seaturtlesdp.html