

haven

A magazine exploring the *exceptional nature* of Bald Head Island, North Carolina



environments



In Her Own Time

Lessons on Patience and the Loggerhead Turtle

By Jason Frye

Photography by Millie Holloman

8:50 p.m.

It's dark as Lauren and I head down South Bald Head Wynd toward the Bald Head Island Conservancy. The houses on either side of the road sit shuttered tight against the night, light escaping in slats and lines around window shades. Overhead, the moon and stars. The brightest stars reflect on the ocean, on waves receding, waves breaking, waves to be. In about two months' time, the moon will guide hatchling Loggerhead sea turtles out to sea, out to their lives.



9:00 p.m.

A stuffed Northern Gannet hangs from the ceiling of the Conservancy classroom. Its eyes look alive. They make me think of the Hitchcock movie, “The Birds,” and I find a seat away from it. A young woman comes in carrying a walkie-talkie and a roll of red cellophane.

“I’m Jessica Messer, but call me Jess,” she says, calling the dozen of us to order. “I’m one of the turtle interns with the Bald Head Island Conservancy, and I’m really glad you could make it out for our turtle walk. We have a few things to cover before we get started, though.”

She quizzes us on turtles. *What kind of turtles nest on Bald Head Island?* Mostly Loggerheads. *What is their shell called?* A carapace. *The little puzzle pieces that cover the carapace?* Scutes. *The bottom?* Plastron. *How many eggs in a nest?* About 120. *How long do Loggerhead sea turtles live?* Around 70 to 80 years.

Jess changes direction, taking her cue from the three tow-headed young boys in the front row.

Jessica asks, “Want to see a Loggerhead skull?”

They shriek with delight.

She grabs a skull from a nearby table, points out the eye sockets and brain cavity, and passes it around, starting and ending with the boys. The skull is big, almost as big as mine, and heavy. It is hard to believe this is from a turtle.

While the boys examine the skull for the second time, Jess brings out a Loggerhead carapace. It is massive, nearly as tall as the boys in front of me and no doubt as heavy.

“This turtle was about 250 pounds,” Jess says. “That’s about average for a female. Does anyone want to pick it up?”

No one volunteers. We all sit still, waiting for someone else to go first. I’m afraid I’ll drop it. Jess waits, knowing we all want to get a closer look.

The oldest boy wants to try. He grabs it, heaves, gets it off the floor and back down. The other boys’ eyes widen at his feat.

Now that he’s broken the ice, I decide

to try. I grab it, lift. It is surprisingly light, maybe 50 pounds. I give it back to Jess. The skull and carapace are cool, but I want to see an actual living turtle tonight.

“See anything unusual on the inside of the shell?” Jess asks.

The turtle’s spine runs up the middle; it looks like stitches holding the two sides together.

“Loggerheads’ backbones are attached to the shell,” Jess explains. “So they can’t pull into their shells like other turtles. That’s one reason their skull is so thick, to defend against predators.”

Jess shows us slides, gives us facts. Loggerheads have been listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act since 1978. Only one in a thousand reaches adulthood. Hatchlings return to their natal beaches to nest when they reach sexual maturity, around 25 or 30 years old. Groups like the Conservancy place satellite tags on some turtles and track them, studying their migration patterns and locations online.

Before we leave for the turtle walk, she lays down some ground rules. Red lights only; white lights look like the moon and stars, distracting or confusing the turtle.



TURTLE SKULL

Before we leave for the turtle walk, she lays down some ground rules. Red lights only; white lights from flashlights look like the moon and stars, distracting or confusing the turtle. That's why she brought red cellophane. Be calm, quiet, respectful around the turtles. Keep the exterior lights off at your beach house during nesting season, as they confuse the turtles.

She wraps up her presentation with a bold statement.

“Every turtle walk I’ve done this summer has seen at least one turtle,” she says, a playful gleam in her eyes. “So, hopefully I’ll keep up my streak tonight.”

JUST THE FACTS The Bald Head Island Conservancy is one of five organizations in the United States to monitor every nesting turtle and nest on their beaches.

The National Marine Fisheries Service recognizes Bald Head Island as an Index Beach for sea turtle nesting activity and the Conservancy's efforts in sea turtle preservation and research.



TURTLE CARAPACE



9:57 p.m.

Jess stands just above the tide line, her red headlamp illuminating the waves.

“Have you guys seen bioluminescence?” she asks. “Think of fireflies, how they glow. Bio—life, luminescence—light. Living creatures that can make their own light. On Bald Head Island, we see a lot of bioluminescence on the beach. Watch.”

With that, she wipes her hand across the damp sand. Where she touched glows green, like hundreds of pinpoint fireflies. The boys in our group are thoroughly impressed. They forget about looking for a turtle for a moment, and kneel and wipe the sand, cheering each time it glows.

10:12 p.m.

“I see one,” one of the boys yells.

I look his way, jealous he saw a turtle pull itself from the waves first.

Jess deftly snatches up a ghost crab as it darts past the boy. She holds it with an ease and care that only comes after catching a few. The boys cluster around her, staring at it, wishing they had been brave enough to grab it like she did.

A red headlight approaches from down South Beach—more interns on an all-night turtle watch. The sound of an ATV engine grows as it nears.

Jess flags them down, asks about turtles. They report seeing nothing but a couple of foxes. “But we’re out here all night, we’ll see something before long,” one of them says. They take off into the dark.

11:00 p.m.

The sand around Lauren’s feet lights up with every step she takes.

“It’s the bioluminescence Jess was talking about,” I say. I turn off my red headlamp and we watch her feet. The bioluminescent creatures light up like fireflies or dying stars in the sand. If she’d run, her footprints would stay lit behind her like in a music video.

We stand in the silence and dark for a minute.

“Do you think we’ll see a turtle tonight?” I ask. My contacts are in rebellion with my eyes and I want to take them out.

“I hope so,” Lauren says. “Why, do you think we should go?”

I look at the rest of our group clustered around Jess 15 yards away, then at my watch, 11 o’clock. The boys are starting to wind down. I can’t leave before they do.

“I don’t know. I hate to go because I know they’ll see one as soon as we leave.” Down the beach, Jess takes her radio from her belt, says something into it. Her group seems energized.

“We got one,” she yells over the surf.

JUST THE FACTS

The Conservancy’s Sea Turtle Protection Program is made possible through efforts by paid staff, including a designated sea turtle naturalist; interns from universities around the nation; and Bald Head Island residents.

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on the beach. Watch.”

With that, she wipes her hand
across the damp sand. Where
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TURTLE PATROL



GHOST CRAB



11:20 p.m.

We follow Jess's cart to a beach access on East Beach. When we've all parked, Jess calls us together.

"She's down the beach about 60 yards," she says. "Two other interns are there taking measurements and they say she's nesting right in the dunes."

I look down the beach at the two bobbing red lights. From here I can't see much; the swell of the dune and the thick clumps of sea oats keep the turtle and interns just out of sight.

"You'll all be able to get up close and touch her, watch her actually lay her clutch of eggs into the nest," Jess says, trying to hide her excitement. "No loud talking. Give her plenty of space. She's about half way through the nesting, so let's go."

Jess leads us down the beach, past the houses closed up and dark. If the people inside knew what was outside, they'd leave their TV-couches and bedtime-books to get their feet dirty and watch the show nature is putting on out here.

As we get closer, I see two interns on their knees in the sand beside the turtle. I

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know we were told what to expect, even got to examine a Loggerhead turtle carapace and skull, but the turtle’s size surprises me. This is no box turtle like the ones I caught when I was a kid. This thing’s shell is three-and-a-half feet long and two feet wide. Some of the scutes are bigger than turtles I would catch.

We school behind it, watching Jess and the other interns and the turtle, waiting for one of them to give us a cue.

Jess leaves the interns to their measuring and scientific note-taking and grabs the sleepy but rapt boys. She takes them to the back of the turtle and points at things on its carapace. They tentatively stretch their hands toward the turtle and stop, watching Jess for guidance. She extends her own hand, strokes the turtle. The boys follow suit, memories rising on their brains like the textures of the turtle’s carapace.

Others from our group huddle with Jess at the turtle’s back, watching intently as she points out the intricacies of nesting.

When our turn comes, I hesitate, nervous that I will somehow disturb her, cause her to stop nesting. I kneel on the sand be-

tween my wife and Jess and she starts her mini-lecture again.

“Look there and you can see the eggs,” Jess whispers, pointing.

We look in the hole under the turtle’s backside. They’re at the bottom, gleaming like peeled hard-boiled eggs. More fall on top of them.

“Turtle barnacles,” says Jess, pointing out what look like little volcanoes on the turtle’s back. “Skeleton shrimp,” she says, noting the inch-long shrimp scurrying across the carapace.

Then comes the moment I’ve been nervous about.

“You can touch her,” Jess says. “Just be easy, gentle, and only touch her shell here at the back.”

I reach out, afraid of what will happen. Her shell is surprisingly warm. The texture of her scutes and the briny smell of her body remind me of an old book. I can’t help but think that if I look close enough I’ll find the words of a secret I shouldn’t know, or a map to a place I should never visit.

“If you come around the side a little

you can see her face,” Jess says. “Look at her eyes. She sheds tears to keep the sand out when she’s not in the water, as well as excrete excess salt from her body.”

I scoot around the side and watch her. She watches the interns as they measure flippers and scribble notes. Tears run into the corner of her mouth. She swings her head to me and my breath catches in my throat.

She looks right into my eyes. The sound of the waves drops away. My heart stills. She says to me, “I’m putting all I’ve worked for here under the sand. My life in a hundred tiny eggs.”

I look away, afraid. Changed.

JUST THE FACTS

In 2008, the Conservancy documented 103 Loggerhead nests. In 2007, 55 nests were documented.

Several turtles are tagged with satellite tracking devices each year. The Conservancy auctions off naming rights to tagged turtles to offset costs. Tagged turtles from around the world can be tracked at seaturtle.org.

On the low slope of the beach, she drags herself across the tide-smoothed sand. I think, *Her tracks look like a tractor's*, then, *No, a tractor's look like hers.*

11:51 p.m.

The turtle turns from her nest, digs her flippers deep in the sand and scoops, covering it faster than I thought she would. She flips, scoops, pats and smooths until she's satisfied with her camouflage job. As soon as she's gone, the interns will cage the nest with chicken wire and wood slats to protect it from predators.

After an exhausting hour of depositing her clutch of eggs into the side of the dune, she finally turns to the sea. She digs her flippers deep, kicks, and lets gravity take her down the dune face.

On the low slope of the beach, she drags herself across the tide-smoothed sand. I think, *Her tracks look like a tractor's*, then, *No, a tractor's look like hers.*

The first high-washing wave reaches her and she stops to rest. She moves out on the next, rests when it recedes. Again and again until she's well past the tide line.

12:05 a.m.

In the water now, waiting for the next wave to carry her out, she turns back to her nest. The stars reflect on the ocean, on the wet sand around her. A small wind moves the sea oats in the dunes behind us.

We all watch silent, awed.

The wave comes, breaks, washes over her, takes her from our view.

It recedes and she's gone.

Above us, the stars and moon and a scrim of clouds oblivious to what we've just witnessed.

The beach is empty, deflated without her. 🐢

Jason Frye lives in Wilmington, N.C., with his wife Lauren and their cat Ernie Brown. He holds his MFA in Creative Writing, and his works appear in crazyhorse and ellipsis.

JUST THE FACTS

Turtle Walks focused on watching nesting females are conducted nightly from early June to early August. In early August, walks change to four nights a week and monitor nests for hatching events.

Only members of the Bald Head Island Conservancy may participate in Turtle Walks. A Friend Membership, which includes two passes for a Turtle Walk, is \$75. Go to www.bhic.org or stop by Turtle Central for membership information.