



# Editor's Note

## The Ridleys—Reasons for Hope

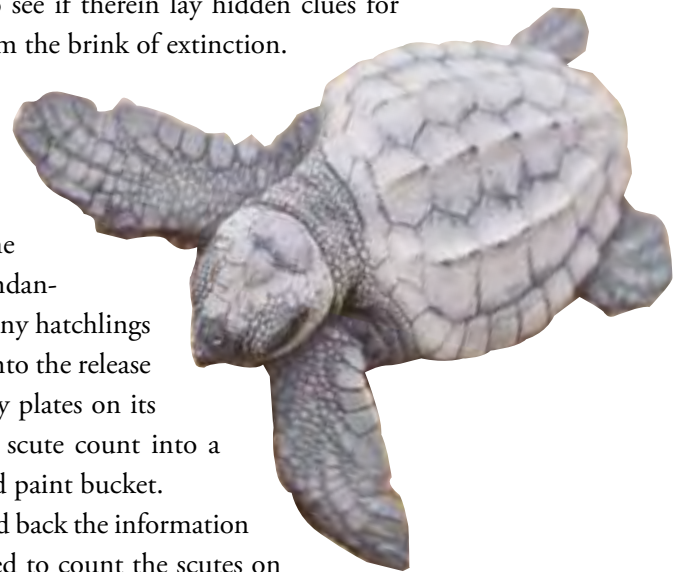
I recently found a bundle of cassette tapes in my basement among some old research materials. I was taken back in time, hearing my own youthful voice droning “13-5-5-5-13” [cricket sounds, bird call], “13-5-5-5-13” [dog barking, splash], “13-5-5-5-13,” and on and on for hours. A slight variation would occasionally sneak in—“13-5-5-5-14” or “13-5-6-5-13”—and it was those anomalies that piqued my curiosity. *Scutes* are the external plates on a turtle's shell, and one summer, 30 years ago, I decided that I would count the carapacial scutes of as many Kemp's ridley turtles as I could lay my hands on. I wanted to better understand that variation and to see if therein lay hidden clues for bringing this disappearing species back from the brink of extinction.

I was in Rancho Nuevo, Mexico, working for the bi-national Kemp's ridley project. I had a lot of time on my hands, and I wanted a minimally invasive research project that might yield results to guide the conservation of this, the world's most endangered sea turtle species. So, as each of the tiny hatchlings emerged from its nest, and before it went into the release bucket, I took a moment to count the tiny plates on its carapace and to recite aloud the five-part scute count into a cassette recorder propped atop an upturned paint bucket.

Later, by candlelight in my tent, I played back the information and transcribed it to data sheets. I managed to count the scutes on 5,919 turtles that summer. To this day, the first thing I mindlessly do with any turtle—be it a live specimen, a photograph, or even a turtle knick-knack or stuffed toy—is to make a quick scute count. I can't help it. Although my first major research effort went largely unnoticed, I am very proud to have been a small part of what is now a remarkable ongoing success story—the recovery of the Kemp's ridley. This species still has a long road ahead before its population reaches the shockingly high levels seen in film footage from 1947. But, it appears to be on the mend, with consistent increases for the past several years because of the hard work, tenacity, and boldness of Mexican and American conservationists who have been laboring since the 1960s (see page 35 for a timeline of the Kemp's ridley recovery).

The close cousin of the Kemp's ridley—the olive ridley—also gives us hope. Today, it is without question the most abundant of the world's sea turtle species. Yet it also faced—and will continue to face—its share of hazards, including a period of many years of systematic harvesting of adults at its largest mass nesting site: Playa Escobilla in Oaxaca, Mexico (see the Special Feature on pages 26–35 for a discussion of mass nesting). The slaughterhouse was shut down long ago, illegal harvest is vastly reduced, and now more than a million olive ridleys nest annually at Escobilla.

These two hardy creatures serve as examples of how conservation can make a difference when practiced soundly and steadfastly. They are hopeful reminders of the importance of staying the course in our efforts to address the challenges that sea turtles and their ocean habitats face around the world.



Visit [www.SeaTurtleStatus.org](http://www.SeaTurtleStatus.org) to learn more about Rod's work in Rancho Nuevo.

THIS PAGE: A Kemp's ridley hatchling leaves the nest. Using the scute-counting method described above, how many scutes can you count? © THANE WIBBELS

AT LEFT: The hatchery at Rancho Nuevo, Mexico, the beach at which more than 40 percent of all Kemp's ridley nesting occurs. Protection of nesting females, their eggs, and their hatchlings over the past 30 years has helped to bring Kemp's ridleys back from the brink of extinction.

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