

St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge. 1997. Public Hearing on Expanding Red Wolf Program to Little St. George Island, to be held March 3, 1997. News Release by Department of the Interior, US Fish and Wildlife Service, St. Vincent NWR, Post Office Box 447, Apalachicola, Florida 32329.

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Fig. 1. Location of Cape St. George Island.

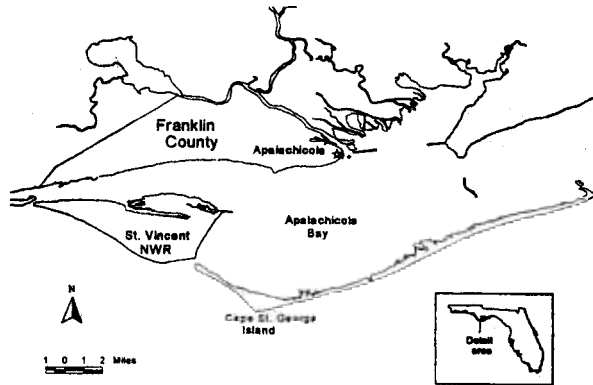


Fig. 2. History of predator removal vs. percent of nests depredated for years 1992 through 1999.

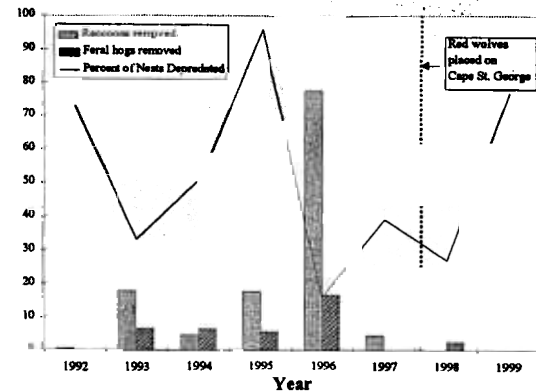
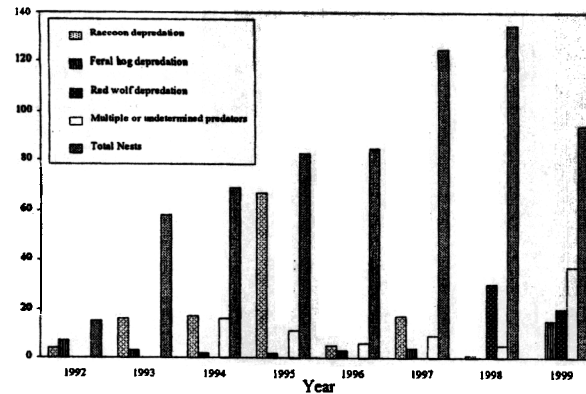


Fig. 3. Numbers of depredated nests by predator types and total number of nests 1992 through 1999.



Scavenging of Turtle Carcasses by American Alligators, *Alligator mississippiensis*, in Georgia, USA

LIANNE PIERRARD¹ AND MICHAEL G. FRICK²

¹Tybee Island Marine Science Center, 10615 Abercorn Street, Apartment F-5, Savannah, Georgia 31419, USA (Turtlegirl28@juno.com)

²Caretta Research Project, Post Office Box 9841, Savannah, Georgia 31412, USA

American alligators (*Alligator mississippiensis*) have been documented to feed on a wide variety of organisms, including the remains of deceased and relatively decomposed animals (Delany and Abercrombie, 1986). However, marine turtles are unknown from their diet. Moreover, scavenging the carcasses of dead sea turtles has not been documented. Here, we report observations of *A. mississippiensis* scavenging loggerhead sea turtle (*Caretta caretta*) carcasses on three Georgia barrier islands.

On 10 May 1999 at 2011 hour Caretta Research Project (CRP) personnel found the remains of a moderately decomposed subadult *Caretta* (SCL = 55.0 cm,

SCW = 45.9 cm, SPL = 32.3, SPW = 37.9 cm, Georgia Department of Natural Resources (GADNR) biopsy/specimen #GA99051001-WASI) on the north end of Wassaw Island (31°54.3'N 80°56.2'W). The carcass was pulled further up the beach, towards the dunes, so that it would not wash out later that night with the approach of high tide. Later that night, at 2300 hour, as patrols were being conducted for nesting sea turtles a large American alligator (~2.7-3.0 m long, TL) was found investigating the aforementioned turtle carcass. When the patrol vehicle approached the alligator it began to raise its body up and hiss vigorously. However, it did not flee towards the ocean as

most alligators do when surprised on the beach (personal observation). The alligator was left with the turtle carcass at 2330 hour.

On 11 May 1999 at 1200 hour, CRP personnel traveled back to GA99051001-WASI to take photographs of the specimen for GADNR documentation purposes. Upon arrival at the stranding site, we could see alligator tracks where the alligator was spotted the previous night. The tracks lead westward towards the dunes. However, the only remaining evidence of the turtle carcass was a depression where the turtle was placed, two costal scutes, and the right front flipper. *A. mississippiensis* tracks crossed the locality where the stranded turtle had rested. Following the alligator tracks into the dunes, we began to find pieces of the decomposing turtle along the alligator's route. Collectively, we relocated three scutes (with epibiota still attached), five ribs, two hyoplastra, the upper and lower tomia, marginal and pygal bones, horseshoe crab claws (presumably stomach contents), and portions of the esophagus with visible papillae. Turtle parts and alligator tracks lead directly to an alligator hole located on the eastern edge of Beach Pond (31°54.3'N 80°56.4'W) approximately 150 m away from where the stranding was originally located.

The wind of the previous night was blowing relatively hard out of the east (~20 knots). It is our belief that the prevailing winds carried the turtle carcass smell directly westward towards Beach Pond where the observed alligator apparently resides. Since the alligator's tracks lead directly from the 'gator hole' to the turtle carcass, we also believe that the alligator ventured to the beach to investigate the smell of the decomposing turtle.

Researchers on other Georgia barrier islands have observed similar instances. An *A. mississippiensis* was seen scavenging a loggerhead carcass on Blackbeard Island (31°28.4'N 81°13.1'W) in 1998 (Deb Keineth, personal communication). Additionally, two instances in 1995 and 1996 occurred on Little St. Simons Island (31°15.4'N 81°25.5'W) where alligators were observed carrying decomposing loggerhead carcasses down the beach and to fresh water ponds located behind the dunes (Michael Robinson, personal communication).

Strandings are often times used to estimate the annual

mortality of certain sea turtle species even though several studies have questioned the practice (Epperly *et al.*, 1996; Shoop *et al.*, 1998; Shoop *et al.*, 1999). Since many factors attribute to the likelihood of a dead sea turtle washing ashore, the possibility exists that strandings only represent a fraction of the overall annual mortality actually occurring. Additionally, the number of dead turtles reported each year might actually be higher than currently believed since alligators do scavenge the small percentage of turtles that actually wash up on the beach. More information is needed to determine the commonness of these scavenging events before we can accurately assess the effect of alligator scavenging on the real number of dead turtles washing ashore annually in Georgia.

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Sea Turtle Mortality in North Carolina (USA): A Summary of 1999 Stranding Events

RUTH BOETTCHER

North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, Post Office Box 178, Marshallberg, North Carolina 28553, USA
(boettcr@coastalnet.com)

INTRODUCTION

Strandings are one of the few indices available to measure sea turtle mortality in state and adjacent federal waters (Murphy and Hopkins-Murphy, 1989; Magnuson *et al.*, 1990; Caillouet *et al.*, 1991). In 1999, sea turtle strandings in North Carolina reached their highest level

since the inception of the state's Sea Turtle Stranding and Salvage Network (NCSTSSN) in 1980. Moreover, they comprised approximately 19% of the total number of strandings reported in the United States last year (Wendy Teas, NMFS, personal communication). This information, along with other unique events, is summarized below.