

Island Observer

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The ARK has handled 204 sea turtles so far this year. Of these 105 have been alive and treated at the ARK and 99 have been found dead and were examined, photographed, measured and preserved for necropsy (or if they were too badly decomposed, buried). Occasionally people mistake other creatures for sea turtles. The most common mistake is misidentifying land turtles which are sometimes found in the sea, by the bay side or on the beach. The ARK does rehabilitate land turtles and tortoises as well as sea turtles. One sure way to know if you have a land turtle is that if it can pull its head and limbs into its shell, it's a land turtle. Sea turtles cannot do this – and do not need to do this as a survival technique – they can swim fast while land turtles trundle along at a less than hare's pace.

Then sometimes people really make mistakes. Last week I drove 53 miles to find a dead stingray that someone told me was “definitely a sea turtle”. They had carefully marked it with a stake for me to find. This ray had been mutilated by having its barb removed, presumably for a souvenir. Please don't do this or cut off the tail as some people do; that's barbaric (no pun intended). Recently I watched a fisherman do the right thing: he carefully turned the large ray he caught upside down on the sand, removed the hook quite easily and pushed the fish back out into the surf all the while staying well away from the tail.

Of the 105 sea turtles admitted to the ARK this year, 56 have been released and 26 remain in our care still recovering or are waiting for the right conditions to release them. Some have died but our overall success rate is 78%. We have actually released 80 turtles in 2009, some being held over the winter from last year, and more are to come (or go) soon. The ARK invites you to see four large loggerheads go free on this Labor Day weekend. Bob and Jay, Crash and Bette will walk into the sea at Marker 35 on Mustang Island Gulf beach at 10AM on Saturday 5th September. Marker 35 is opposite the Pioneer R/V Park walkway over the dunes, 0.9 miles south of Gulf Access Road #1 (NOT 1A). The only reason these turtles (big as they are, none are full adults yet) are able to go back where they belong is due to the fruits of the labors of the ARK's workers and volunteers. Bette's story is typical. Found at Marker 6 on Port Aransas' beach it has taken 17 months of care and feeding, and some pain, too (ask Candice to tell you the story) to get Bette to this stage. Our Big Turtle Whisperer Ken Dalton in particular shows endless patience in getting animals like Bette to finally feed properly and be ready to go home.

Greater and Lesser. Black-backed Gulls, that is. The standard gull here is the Laughing Gull. Adults are distinctive with their black heads, red beaks and legs in the summer and not quite so distinctive in the winter when beaks and legs turn black and heads go white. In winter invaders from the north come down: big gulls like the Ring-billed and Herring

gull. On rare occasions unusual gulls like Glaucous, Sabine's, Bonaparte's gulls, Kittiwake and the two black-backed gulls come visiting. Look out for these two large, handsome gulls with their dark backs on our Gulf beaches. The Greater has pink legs and is really big while the Lesser has yellow legs and feet and is smaller than the Herring Gull.