

# SHARE THE BEACH



St. Johns County is fortunate to be the home to several species of endangered or threatened sea turtles that arrive every spring and summer to nest along our 42-mile coastline. People and sea turtles can co-exist when we take steps to share and protect this common habitat. Both residents and visitors of St. Johns County have a special opportunity and responsibility to protect these magnificent creatures along with their vulnerable nesting and feeding habitat.

## THE NESTING PROCESS

During the nesting season the adult female will drag herself ashore, crawl up to the dune line, dig a nest with her back flippers, deposit nearly 100 eggs, cover the nest, and return to the sea. The eggs must incubate in the sand, undisturbed, for a period of about two months. Typically, at the end of the incubation period, the two-inch long hatchlings will emerge from the surface of the sand after nightfall, when conditions are cool. Their natural instinct draws them to the reflection and open view of the ocean.

## SEA TURTLE PROTECTION

Sea turtles are protected by the United States Endangered Species Act of 1973 and through Florida Statutes Chapter 370. The St. Johns Board of County Commissioners has implemented laws to reduce many man-made threats. These laws require that coastal construction adhere to strict guidelines for beachfront lighting, and requires that non-compliant turtle lights not be visible from the beach during nesting season. In addition, vehicles are restricted from driving on the beach at night from May 1 through October 31 of each year. Driving is prohibited year round in the Conservation Zone – 15 feet seaward from the base of the dune.

## BEACH LIGHTING

Coastal residents and visitors must prevent all lights from illuminating (or being visible from) the beach including security lights, exterior lights, balcony and porch lights, and landscape lights. Property owners may apply dark window tinting to windows visible from the beach.

## HATCHLINGS AND LIGHTS

Hatchlings emerging from the nest at night instinctively are drawn to the light source along the beach. Artificial light can disorient the hatchling. As a result they move toward the source of light rather than the ocean. Once misdirected, the hatchlings may succumb to predators, exhaustion, dehydration, and automobiles. A single light can misdirect and contribute to the death of hundreds of hatchlings.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

### TIPS FOR SHARING THE BEACH

- ✦ At the end of your visit fill any holes left by sandcastles and tire tracks.
- ✦ Please remove all beach chairs or canopies from the beach before dark.
- ✦ Reduce litter and marine debris by disposing of your trash and recycling properly. Pick up any fishing line, rope and plastic that you see and participate in beach clean ups.
- ✦ Never approach sea turtles emerging from or returning to the sea. Nesting females are vulnerable and timid, and can be easily frightened away.
- ✦ Report all dead, injured, stranded turtles and hatchlings or anyone harassing sea turtles or their nests to 1-888-404-FWCC.
- ✦ Place motion detectors on security lights.
- ✦ Apply shields to exterior lights, use low wattage yellow bug lights instead of white lights, and reduce wattage on interior lights.
- ✦ Close curtains, blinds, and shades at night, preventing interior lights from being visible on the beach.
- ✦ **Remember:** Leave only your footprints in the sand.



# ST. JOHNS COUNTY PROTECTED SPECIES

## LOGGERHEAD

*Caretta caretta* is the most common sea turtle species in the southeastern United States, with the east coast of Florida being a very active breeding area. Loggerheads are easily identified by their log-shaped heads, which often measure around 10 inches. Their powerful jaw muscles aid them in crushing their food.

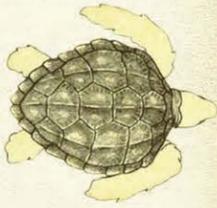
**Carapace:** up to 4 ft

**Weight:** 250 - 400 pounds

**Distribution:** Subtropical areas, all oceans

**Diet:** Mollusks and crabs

**Federal Status:** Threatened



## GREEN

*Chelonia mydas* turtles are not actually green. Their name refers to the color of their body fat. Young turtles eat a wide variety of foods, but the diet changes as they reach adulthood. As adults, green sea turtles are exclusively herbivores, or plant eaters. They eat algae and sea grass which turns their body fat green. Their heads are smaller than other sea turtle species, and the ends of their lower jaws are serrated. They have become endangered in Florida through centuries of being hunted for their meat and eggs.

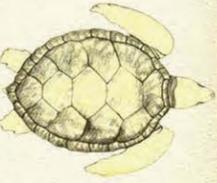
**Carapace:** 3.5 ft

**Weight:** 250 - 400 pounds

**Distribution:** Tropical and subtropical

**Diet:** Sea grasses and algae

**Federal Status:** Endangered



## LEATHERBACK

*Dermochelys coriacea* turtles are the largest of all marine reptiles and are the only sea turtles without hard shells. Their black and white shells lack scales and are covered instead with a rubbery skin, distinguished by seven longitudinal keels or ridges. The leatherback unlike other species, can regulate its body temperature, enabling it to dive deeper and to migrate thousands of miles.

**Carapace:** 9 ft

**Weight:** 710 - 1300 pounds

**Distribution:** Nest in tropics, can wander to sub-Arctic waters

**Diet:** Jellyfish

**Federal Status:** Endangered



## ANASTASIA ISLAND BEACH MOUSE

*Peromyscus polionotus phasma* is a subspecies of the wide-ranging Southeastern oldfield mouse. They live in the sand dunes where sea oats and dune panic grass grow and are the only mammal native to Anastasia Island. They have a light buff-colored back, pure white underparts, and indistinct, white markings on nose and face. Their light color is thought to be an adaptation to help them blend into their sandy habitats and avoid predators.

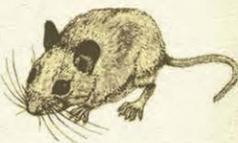
**Size:** 13.85 - 14.28 cm including tail

**Weight:** Average 12.5 grams

**Distribution:** Anastasia Island and Guana Tolomato Matanzas National Estuarine Research Reserve (GTMNERR)

**Diet:** Small Insects, beach grasses and sea oats

**Federal Status:** Endangered



## GOPHER TORTOISE

*Gopheris polyphemus* are often mistaken for sea turtles and placed in the ocean. Their carapace is a solid dark-brown to grayish color with legs and claws for navigating on land and digging burrows. They are considered as a keystone species because their burrows can be up to 50 feet in length, have proven to provide shelter to hundreds of other species.

**Size:** up to 16 inches long

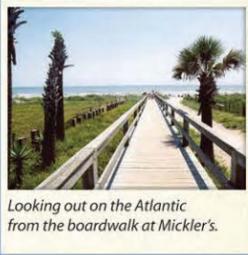
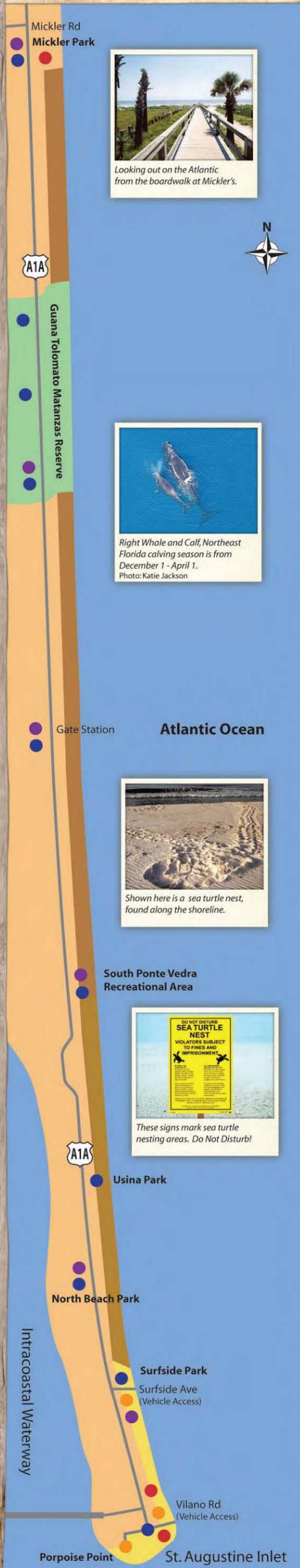
**Weight:** 30 pounds

**Distribution:** Native to Southeast US

**Federal Status:** Threatened



# SOUTH PONTE VEDRA TO VILANO BEACH



Looking out on the Atlantic from the boardwalk at Mickler's.



Right Whale and Calf, Northeast Florida calving season is from December 1 - April 1. Photo: Katie Jackson

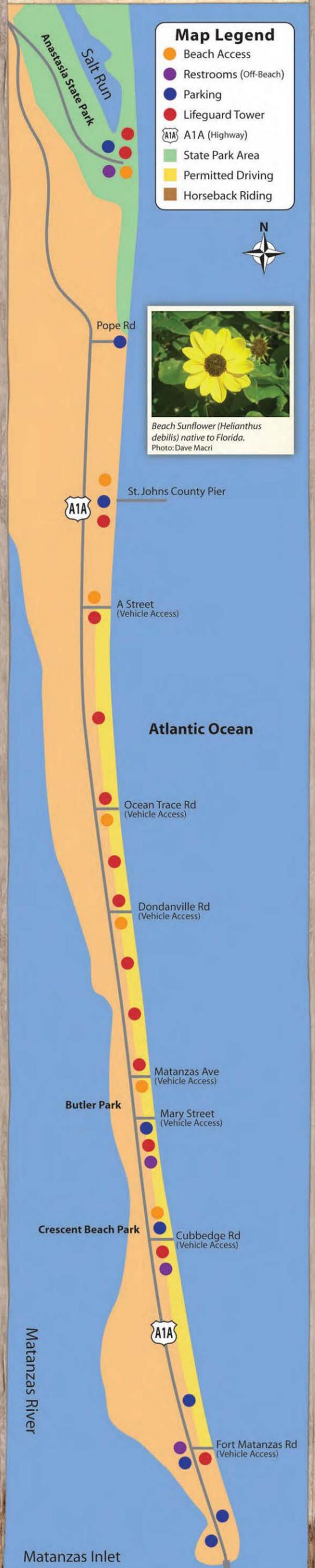


Shown here is a sea turtle nest, found along the shoreline.



These signs mark sea turtle nesting areas. Do Not Disturb!

# ANASTASIA ISLAND TO MATANZAS INLET



**Map Legend**

- Beach Access
- Restrooms (Off-Beach)
- Parking
- Lifeguard Tower
- A1A (Highway)
- State Park Area
- Permitted Driving
- Horseback Riding



Beach Sunflower (*Helianthus debilis*) native to Florida. Photo: Dave Macri

# DUNE SYSTEMS

OF ST. JOHNS COUNTY

## ANASTASIA ISLAND BEACH MICE

Secluded to the island lifestyle, Anastasia Island Beach Mice (AIBM) are located nowhere else outside of Northeast Florida's coastal dunescape; they are protected as a critically endangered species by both the state and federal government. The AIBM and the Southeastern beach mouse are two of six remaining coastal subspecies of the Oldfield mouse, which prior to increased development, had a large home range. AIBM live in small burrow that are similar in size to a 50-cent piece and burrows are used for nesting, food storage and refuge and are often found near clumps of dune grasses. Feral cats and out competing house mouse species have almost exhausted their numbers which are estimated to be less than one hundred fifty individuals.

## GOPHER TORTOISE

Although found on the mainland, gopher tortoises are a unique addition to our coastal dunescape; they are a threatened species, protected by both the state and federal government. An amazing trait of the gopher tortoise is that it shares its burrow with more than 350 other species, for this reason it is called a keystone species. Animals which utilize the gopher tortoise burrows are known as commensal species; meaning they benefit from the gopher tortoise's burrow. In the past many tortoises were killed either for food, or by people who were trying to kill the rattlesnakes that often share their burrows; it is estimated that the number of gopher tortoises in the wild have dropped by 80% over the last one hundred years.



Photo Credit: Jennifer Perez

Where to find more information on the web:

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service:** [www.fws.gov](http://www.fws.gov)

**Caribbean Conservation Corporation:**

[www.ccturtle.org](http://www.ccturtle.org)

**Fish & Wildlife Research Institute:**

[www.research.myfwc.com](http://www.research.myfwc.com)

**Florida Fish and Wildlife**

**Conservation Commission (FWC):** [www.myfwc.com](http://www.myfwc.com)

Report Fish and Wildlife Violations 1.888.404.3922

Right Whale Sightings 1.888.979.4253



**St. Johns County Habitat Conservation**

2175 Mizell Road

St. Augustine, FL 32080

904.209.3740

Wildlife Pager: 904.227.0023

(enter area code and phone number)

**St. Johns County:** [www.sjcfl.us](http://www.sjcfl.us)

# SHARE THE BEACH

St. Johns County's guide to sharing  
and protecting the beaches.



Photo Credit: Florida Dept. Environmental Protection



Photo Credit: Florida Dept. Environmental Protection