

ALDEBARAN
(16th report)
TURTLE WATCHING

Watching the large LEATHERBACK TURTLE emerge from the Ocean, lay her eggs and return to the deep was an unforgettable experience.

It all started back in February when Olivia read about helping at the annual turtle watching on the small Spanish Virgin Island of Culebra. There and then, although still hundreds of miles away it became an objective. Our previous report covered the sailing to and from Culebra and so this report only covers that memorable night.

On arrival at the island Olivia wasted no time in making a telephone call to the ranger in charge of the watch. It was arranged we meet at the bakery near the airport at 1800 hrs on Monday 8th May from where Hobino the ranger would pick us up. Arriving at the bakery just prior to the appointed time we waited and waited and waited while watching the locals coming and going from the bakery/shop and local bar opposite. At 2030 hrs, very disappointed, we returned to the boat. Next morning on making enquiries round the village I discovered where the rangers operated from. By dinghy, walking and hitching I eventually reached the station and met Hobino. He apologised for the previous night explaining he had been working during the day and took the night off. It was agreed we could go that night, meeting at the same place at the later time of 2000 hrs.

With Jimmy and Rita Stanley from Malahide who were visiting us, we reached the bakery just prior to the appointed time and met two Americans, Amy and Kip who were also going on the turtle watch. Hopino arrived after about ten minutes and explained how and why the watch was being carried out. With the six of us packed into his 4 wheel drive jeep we drove about six miles to the end of a dirt track and from there hiked, using our torches, a further mile along a very rugged path to the eastern end of the remote BRAVA beach on Culebra's north coast arriving there at about 2115 hrs. Remember that it gets dark here at 1900 hrs.

Walking in single file to the waters edge we proceeded quietly to the centre of the one mile long beach and then back up the beach to the vegetation about 60 yds. from the waters edge. Here we set up camp for the night on an old tarpaulin. The reason for walking in single file was to reduce the number of footprints into which the turtle hatchlings could get trapped on their short but hazardous journey to the sea.

Having set up camp the ranger went to the farthest end of the beach looking for signs or sightings of a turtle while we remained very quiet at camp. On his return we waited 30 minutes before Olivia and I began the next patrol. We each walked to opposite ends of the beach, which took about ten minutes and, on arrival signalled back with one flash. Had we sighted anything we would have signalled back with three flashes. All signalling was by flashlight. After 40 minutes we gave another flash before returning, somewhat disappointed to the centre. The 40 minute wait in itself was memorable, what with a good moon and star studded sky, waves lapping at your feet and the occasional ship's navigation lights you could have stayed the whole night in that one spot.

Thirty minutes after our return Kip and Amy began their patrol while we tried to get some sleep. At about 12.30, Kip, on his return signalled with three flashes. The Ranger went to verify Kips findings while the rest of us waited with bated breath. Earlier on her patrol Olivia came across turtle tracks and gave the three flashes, however they turned out to be old tracks. This time we all kept our fingers crossed and after what seemed like an age watched Hobino give one flash, then a second and finally the much-awaited third. Like an army platoon we marched, again in single file, to the waters edge and to the waiting Kip and Hobino. The Ranger explained that yes it was a Leatherback Turtle and that she was up near the vegetation digging a hole for her eggs which would take about twenty minutes and when completed would go into a trance before laying. Only then would we be allowed to approach her.

Eventually, as she began laying we cautiously approached and with the light of the moon and the Rangers red torch we saw one of nature's magnificent creatures. Their shell looks and indeed feels like leather, thus the name LEATHERBACKS, with ridges going from head to tail. Rita and Amy were allocated the task of counting the eggs of which she layed 81 large fertilised ones and 25 smaller unfertilised ones which are used to control the temperature of the nest. The rest of us helped in measuring and as she was a young turtle tagging her for the first time with a metal tag and microchip, numbered 404, on her right fore flipper. The reason for using a fore flipper is because sharks sometimes bite rear flippers. Her shell measured 1.45 metres (4' 9"). Hobino was extremely gentle with her and even applied a local anaesthetic before inserting the microchip.

We watched as this magnificent creature which took fifteen years to mature, covered the nest, moved about five yds. along the beach and dug a decoy nest before slowly moving down the beach with stops every four or five yds. and finally returning into the surging surf from which she will emerge up to five times per season between March and August and repeat the laying ritual. Unfortunately only one young on average will survive each 100 eggs she lays.

At this stage the rain started and the Ranger was on the verge of abandoning the remainder of the watch as the climb back to the jeep would become treacherous, however it soon stopped and we continued our patrols until dawn spotting only evidence of a second turtle having come ashore while we had been watching the first one.

Arriving back on the boat at 0630 we all agreed that it was a night and experience to remember. Places like Trinidad organise commercialised turtle watch tours, on our watch we were volunteers helping the ranger and it cost nothing.

Our next report covering St. Vincent and the Grenadines again, Pettit St Vincent, Grenada and Trinidad will be the last before returning home for six weeks on 13th August.

Keep up your e-mails we love to get them.

**Pat and Olivia
Yacht ALDEBARAN
July 2000**