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Community News • Information

- Home
- News
- Opinion
- Dining
- Entertainment
- Classified
- Contact Us

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 Redington Beach - Madeira Beach - Treasure Island - St. Pete Beach

### Citizens watch over endangered sea turtles

By Andrea Lypka

ST. PETE BEACH - Bruno Falkenstein usually sees the beach well before anyone else shows up. On moonless nights and early mornings he patrols the sand looking for sea turtle nests.

"It's fun to be out here early in the morning because you may be lucky enough to see a turtle with phosphorus on her back. It's a substance that glows in the dark. As the sand is hitting her back, it starts to glow. She looks like a million stars sitting on the beach," he said.

Falkenstein advises people not to approach the turtle nests at this time or to take flash pictures that might frighten the animal.

"You may scare her from her nest and she may lay her eggs in the water. Then they will perish. Please, if you see a turtle on the beach, be respectful. Give her a lot of room," he urged. All five species of sea turtles known to inhabit Florida waters – the loggerhead, green turtle, leatherback, Kemp's ridley and hawksbill – are listed as either threatened or endangered, and are protected by Florida statutes. Falkenstein holds a permit from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission allowing him to conduct nesting surveys of marine turtles.

Falkenstein's interest in turtles began in 1978 when he discovered a dead turtle while jogging on the beach. Allen Huff and Jamie Serino from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection responded to his phone call and came out to pick up the turtle.

"They were my mentors and they were the ones who taught me about sea turtles. And I have been doing it ever since," Falkenstein said.

Every morning during the turtle nesting season, from May 1 through October, Falkenstein patrols the beach in his "Turtle Watch" jeep. Rain, wind, high tide and human footprints can make spotting turtle nests challenging, but Falkenstein has developed a keen eye for the job. This year, he believes, will bring a turtle baby boom.

"On the best year we had 39 nests. This year, we still have a long way to go but we already have 16 nests. Fort De Soto has 40 nests. It looks like we are going to have a very good turtle year," he said.

"Turtles come up on the beach, they don't disturb anyone and they are one of the oldest creatures we still have in existence today. They have been living hundreds of thousands of years this way. Men's distraction may cause them to become extinct," he said, referring to how turtle hatchlings, which are instinctively drawn toward the light over the open ocean, can be drawn into dangerous situations by artificial lights from waterfront developments.

Falkenstein says he wouldn't be able to continue without the help of volunteers. Recently, he has taken on a couple of apprentices of his own. Brian Rothenberger, 16, said he became fond of sea turtle patrolling while trying to accumulate community service hours. When Falkenstein is out of town, Rothenberger patrols the beach.



(L to R): Mia Hartleuy, Brian Rothenberger and Bruno Falkenstein.  
 Photo by Andrea Lypka

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"There are days when you don't find anything, but there are days when you find turtle nests. There are no words to explain that feeling," he said.



Fifteen-year-old Mia Hartleuy from Osceola High School has also been patrolling the beach. "It's something I want to do every morning.

Once you come out you start to appreciate turtles more. I have come to love them like Brian and Bruno love them," she said.



*The green sea turtle is one of the more common species that nest on Florida Beaches*

In the early mornings, Falkenstein occasionally meets up with Margo A. Mastropieri, a schoolteacher from Virginia who patrols the beach in the summer. "I am always looking for turtles and turtle nests. They are a prehistoric species and endangered. They are fun to watch," she said.

"With a little luck, the four of us will be able to say to our grandchildren that we had a role in saving the sea turtles," Falkenstein said. "I am so happy to still be able to do this. I'm not too old yet but I am getting there. I hope I will be able to continue doing this for many, many years."

[Home](#) - [News](#) - [Opinion](#) - [Dining](#) - [Entertainment](#) - [Contact](#) - [Site Map](#)

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