

Ham 9 (2)

May 1984

RPM
DAS → 0746

RIDLEY HATCHLINGS AT GAHIRMATHA

On the 3rd and 4th of April, 1984, I was at Gahirmatha (Bhitar Kanika Sanctuary, Orissa), observing the hatchlings of the olive ridley turtle (Lepidochelys olivacea) for the World Wildlife Fund-India.

While approaching Gahirmatha beach, via Dangmal, a large number of hatchlings were seen swimming upstream. In fact at one point in the river, 10 Km from the sea mouth, the hatchling flow rate was calculated at around 18,000 per hour, the concentration being at the middle of the 200m wide river.

Some areas at Gahirmatha beach seemed to be covered by a moving carpet of ridley hatchlings racing towards the sea; From one nest 80 hatchlings were observed to emerge at dusk; they were 140 mm in average carapace length. Hatchlings are positively phototrophic, like the adult females I saw on a previous visit, being attracted to the torch beam shone near them. A great many of them gathered in front of our hut at night, drawn by the bright light issuing from the petromax lamp.

Probably the incredible number of hatchlings produced from a nest have ensured the survival of the species, which does not seem to be lacking either in number or variety of predators both terrestrial and aquatic. At Gahirmatha, I saw several hatchlings in the clutches of ghost crabs (Ocypode sp.), one being recovered from a hole with a neatly severed head. Dogs were seen following the tracks of the nesting adults, sniffing and digging up the nest, and eating the exposed eggs. Avian predators however were seen to take the heaviest toll. Jungle crow (Corvus macrorhynchos) and three species of gulls - blackheaded (Larus ridibundus), brown headed (L. brunnicephalus) and great blackheaded (L. ichthyactus) were seen both eating the hatchlings outright and acting as secondary predators, feeding on the eggs excavated by the dogs. Terns, because of the structure of their bills, are usually unable to make a meal of the hatchlings. However, one of the larger species, the Caspian tern (Hydroprogne caspia) was seen swooping down to the river, to pick up hatchling ridleys.

Indraneil Das
18/20, Ballygunge Place
(East)
Calcutta - 700 019