THIRD RECORD OF AN OLIVE RIDLEY TURTLE (LEPIDOCHELYS OLIVACEA) IN NEW ZEALAND

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INTRODUCTION

The olive ridley turtle *Lepidochelys olivacea* (Eschscholtz, 1829) is pantropical, with greatest abundance in the eastern Pacific, Indian Ocean and Gulf of Guinea (Atlantic) (Zug & Ernst 1994). It is the rarest of the five species of turtles that have reached New Zealand coastal waters (Gill 1997).

The first olive ridley recorded in New Zealand was collected at Flat Point, Wairarapa, in January 1956. The carapace is held by the Museum of New Zealand, Wellington (registration number R.849). It was misidentified as a loggerhead turtle *Caretta caretta* by McCann (1966), but redetermined by Limpus & Roper (1977). A second specimen of this species was found at Kaka Point Beach, near Dunedin, in May 1985 (Darby 1987) and is preserved at Otago Museum, Dunedin (reg. no. VT623, carapace, plastron and limb bones).

This note documents a third record of the olive ridley turtle in New Zealand.

RESULTS

In September 1996 a resident of Hamilton reported to the Department of Conservation a dead turtle washed up on "Waikorea Beach" (to which the Waikorea Stream flows), 20 km north of the Raglan Harbour entrance, west of Hamilton city. Laurence Barea (LB) and Garry Hickman (GH) (Department of Conservation, Hamilton) found the turtle on 6 September and took photographs. The carapace length along the curve was 680 mm, and the maximum width dorsally along the curve was 740 mm. The turtle was in an advanced state of decay, so LB and GH buried it in the sand-dunes. GH later exhumed the bones and presented them to Auckland Museum (reg. no. H2025).

We were both sent photographs of the carapace in dorsal view that showed five, possibly six, costal shields. This ruled out green turtle *Chelonia mydas* and hawksbill turtle *Eretmochelys imbricata*, making loggerhead the most likely species. However, one of us (RC) was struck by the similarity of the carapace shape to that of the 1956 olive ridley carapace (R.849). Colour photographs of both were published in a magazine article on turtles in New Zealand (Coory 1997). We sent photographs of the Waikorea Beach carapace and head to G.R.
Zug, who showed them to two other North American turtle specialists. All agreed that the turtle was most likely an olive ridley (G.R. Zug, pers. comm.), on the basis of size and body shape.

This identification was later confirmed by two other lines of evidence. First, GH provided a photograph of the underside of the turtle that clearly shows four inframarginal scutes, a characteristic of the olive ridley but not of the loggerhead turtle (Cogger 1992: 178). Second, the cleaned skull and lower jaw closely match *Lepidochelys* rather than *Caretta* in terms of the diagrams provided by Carr (1952: 342-3).

**DISCUSSION**

Off Australia, olive ridley turtles are common only in the far north and they are rare on the east coast (Cogger 1992: 183). Though very rare in New Zealand, olive ridleys have turned up at widely separated localities, from southern New Zealand to the warmer north. The superficial similarity of olive ridleys to other marine turtles highlights the need for careful identification of all cheloniid records and sightings.

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**REFERENCES**


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