

# First record of the Olive Ridley Sea Turtle, *Lepidochelys olivacea* (Eschscholtz, 1829), in the Azores Islands, northeastern Atlantic Ocean (Testudines, Cheloniidae)

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While on their way northwestwards to D. João de Castro Bank in the Portuguese Azores Islands for diving and birdwatching on 9 October 2020, occupants of a rib boat from the Best Spot Azores Dive Center (São Miguel Island, Azores), spotted a sea turtle with a bird on top of its carapace, at a position halfway between Ponta dos Mosteiros on São Miguel Island and the bank (37.9676°N, 26.1671°W; Fig. 1). The bird was identified as a Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo* Linnaeus, 1758) and photos were taken. A few days later one of us (GM) posted one of the photos (Fig. 2) of the bird on top of what he believed to be a Green Turtle, *Chelonia mydas* (Linnaeus, 1758) on Facebook. However, upon closer inspection of this photo and enumeration of the number of lateral scutes by the first author, it was realised that the initial identification was in error. After obtaining another image of the other side of the animal, we were able to confirm unequivocally that the turtle was actually an olive ridley, *Lepidochelys olivacea*. Identification of *L. olivacea* is straightforward when its lateral scutes are visible, including from its congener *L. kempii* Garman, 1880 since *L. olivacea* is the only sea turtle with six or more lateral scutes (Pritchard and Mortimer, 1999).

This is the first confirmed record of this species from the waters around the Azores, and the northernmost record for the northeastern Atlantic. Olive ridleys have a circumtropical distribution, with nesting occurring

throughout tropical waters (except in the Gulf of Mexico) and migratory circuits in tropical and some subtropical areas of eastern central and northeastern Atlantic (from Angola to Morocco). Their last IUCN Red List assessment defined the species as Vulnerable (Abreu-Grobois and Plotkin, 2008). Migratory movements are less well studied than other marine turtle species but are known to involve coastal waters. Within a region, olive ridleys may move between oceanic and neritic zones (Plotkin et al., 1995; Shanker et al., 2003).

This is the first new record of a marine turtle for the Azores since 1990, when Bolton and Martins (1990) reported a catch of *L. kempii*. Our record increases the number of sea turtle species for this archipelago to six, including *Caretta caretta* (Linnaeus, 1758) (native), *Chelonia mydas* (undetermined status since the species occurs consistently throughout the archipelago), *Eretmochelys imbricata* (Linnaeus, 1766) (vagrant), *Lepidochelys kempii* (vagrant), and *Dermochelys coriacea* (Vandelli, 1761) (migrant) (Santos et al., 2010). All marine mammals and reptiles in the Azores are protected by law including catching, holding, keeping, and collecting. No nesting beaches have ever been documented in the region.

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## References

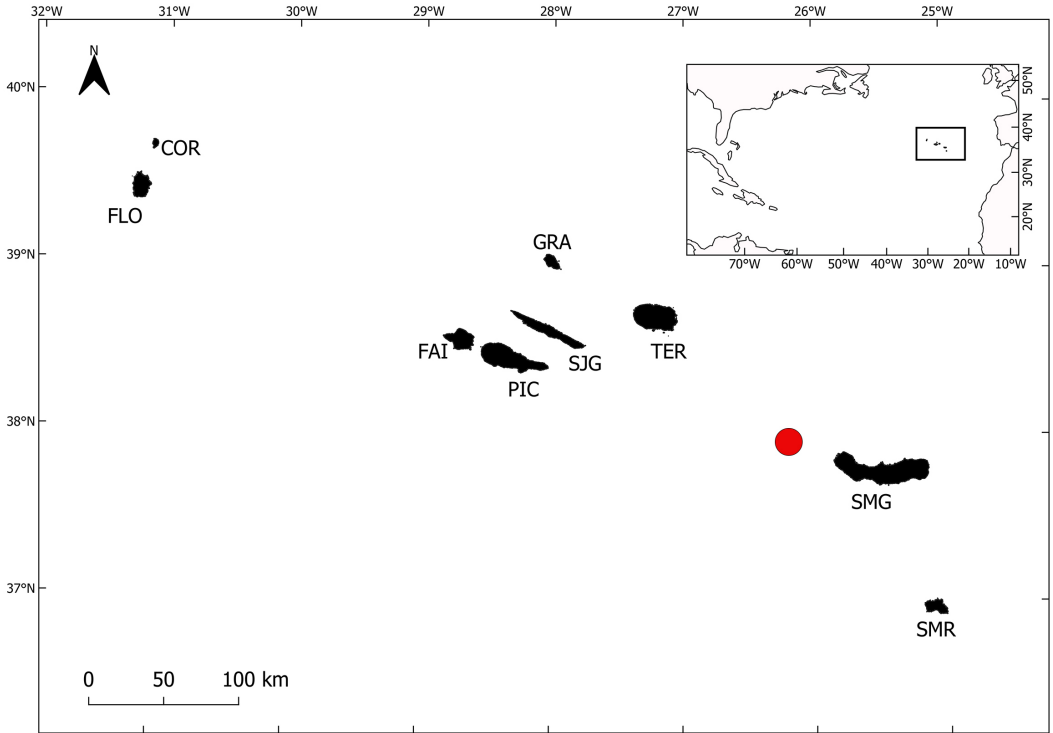
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**Figure 1.** Map of the Azores archipelago with islands labelled using three-letter acronyms as follows: COR – Corvo, FLO – Flores, FAI – Faial, PIC – Pico, GRA – Graciosa, SJG – São Jorge, TER – Terceira, SMG – São Miguel, SMR – Santa Maria. The location of our sighting of the Olive Ridley Sea Turtle (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) is marked by the red circle.



**Figure 2.** A Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*) pausing on top of an Olive Ridley Sea Turtle (*Lepidochelys olivacea*), near São Miguel Island in the Azores (37.9676°N, 26.1671°W). Note the seven lateral scutes on the turtle. Photo by Gerbrand Michielsen.

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