

MACKIDS SPOTLIGHT: MADDALENA BEARZI AND ALEX BOERSMA – MACKIDS SCHOOL & LIBRARY

March 26, 2025

A blue banner with a starry background. On the left is the book cover for "The Secret Life of a Sea Turtle" showing a sea turtle swimming over a coral reef. The cover text includes "The Secret Life of a Sea Turtle", "written by Maddalena Bearzi", and "illustrated by Alex Boersma". To the right of the cover are two circular portraits of Maddalena Bearzi and Alex Boersma. Above the portraits is the text "MACKIDS SCHOOL & LIBRARY CREATOR SPOTLIGHT". Below the portraits is the text "Maddalena Bearzi and Alex Boersma" and "The Secret Life of a Sea Turtle".

This month's Author Spotlight features *The Secret Life of a Sea Turtle* author **Maddalena Bearzi** and illustrator **Alex Boersma**—a dazzling nonfiction picture book that explores one sea turtle's extraordinary life from hatchling to adulthood.

Maddalena, what inspired you to write *The Secret Life of a Sea Turtle*?

Maddalena: In my early twenties, I had the unique opportunity to develop a field research and eco-volunteer program focused on sea turtles in a remote Yucatán reserve. Although my background was in studying lizards—reptiles of an entirely different taxonomic order—it was this experience with herpetology and my willingness to embrace months in a secluded location that secured me the job. For several summers, I traveled to Yucatán to witness a segment of the astonishing life cycle of these ancient, dinosaur-like creatures. I marveled at the sight of female sea turtles coming ashore to lay their eggs, and I waited patiently as the tiny hatchlings would emerge from the sand and instinctively make their perilous journey to the sea. The peace and raw beauty of the place—combined with the majestic presence of these animals, left an indelible mark. It ignited a desire to share with others the breathtaking experiences I had in the company of these non-human beings.

Alex, can you tell us a little bit about your art process in creating the stunning illustrations for this book? How did you bring the journey of this sea turtle to life?

Alex: I started off with a lot of visual research, gathering images of green sea turtles at all the different life stages, and watching lots of videos of turtles swimming, babies emerging from nests, and so forth. Watching animal videos is definitely one of the most fun parts of my process! Then I made some little sea turtle models out of wire and polymer clay—one adult and one baby—to help me figure out the poses I wanted to show the turtle in, and also to figure out what the lighting would look like in those poses. I even took my models to the beach to have a little photo shoot! For the final artwork, each drawing started as a full graphite drawing on



The Secret Life of a Sea Turtle is packed with information about the journey that sea turtles face from hatchling to adulthood. Maddalena, do you have any favorite facts, or facts that you find particularly fascinating, about sea turtles that are included in this book?

Maddalena: One of the many intriguing facts about sea turtles is the pivotal role that nest temperature plays in shaping the development of these animals' eggs, including determining the sex of the hatchlings! At approximately 85 degrees Fahrenheit, the nest produces equal numbers of male and female turtles. However, warmer temperatures lead to a higher proportion of females, while cooler temperatures result in a majority of males. This phenomenon also has significant conservation implications for the preservation of these already vulnerable reptiles. Rising sand temperatures—driven by climate change, adversely affect the natural gender ratio: producing more females decreases reproductive opportunities and genetic diversity, with a negative impact on the long-term resilience of sea turtle populations around the world.

Alex, what was your favorite part in making the art for *The Secret Life of a Sea Turtle*? And what was most surprising?

Alex: One of my favorite (and the most challenging!) parts of making the art was figuring out ways to make the sea turtle emotive. While they're very cute and personable, sea turtles don't have very expressive faces, so I had to find subtle, realistic ways to convey what the turtle might be feeling—often by a slight widening of the eyes, or slightly opened mouth, or even just with the overall composition of a spread.

Do you both have any favorite spreads or scenes in the book?

Maddalena: Choosing just one favorite spread is a challenge, given [Alex's] terrific skill in capturing every detail of a sea turtle's journey through her life. But if I were to pick, the scene featuring the two crabs and the raccoon stalking the hatchlings on the sandy shores while a blue heron inspects from above stands out. It vividly portrays the struggle that the baby sea turtles endure as they "navigate" their perilous path to the sea, evading one predator after another.

Alex: My favorite spread is a top-down view of the baby sea turtles making a break for the water after emerging from their underground nest. Predators abound: a heron swoops overhead, while raccoons and crabs stalk the beach. I imagined the baby sea turtles navigating this obstacle course of threats on their way to the ocean, and it just made sense to use an aerial view, so you can also see their tracks and the meandering routes they take.



and embrace nature firsthand. Even in a bustling city, there's always something "wild" to discover. And never lose your passion for nature or the commitment to protecting the myriad of nonhuman animals—marine or otherwise, that lack a voice to defend themselves.

What do you both hope young readers take away from *The Secret Life of a Sea Turtle*?

Maddalena: I hope to ignite a sense of wonder in young readers for the astonishing—and in part still unknown, lives of sea turtles, fostering a better connection to the natural world. By inspiring curiosity, perhaps some of them will feel encouraged not only to protect these reptiles but also to cultivate a broader appreciation and responsibility for all the small and large creatures sharing our planet with us humans.

Alex: I hope that readers enjoy and appreciate just how different the world is for a sea turtle than it is for us humans. It's hard to imagine what it's like to live a life moving between land and sea—how jarring, to be born in a cozy little nest underground, and then quickly move into the vast openness of the ocean! I think one of the coolest things about sea turtles is how they are able to navigate across thousands of miles of open ocean, and then return to the same beaches on which they were born.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR

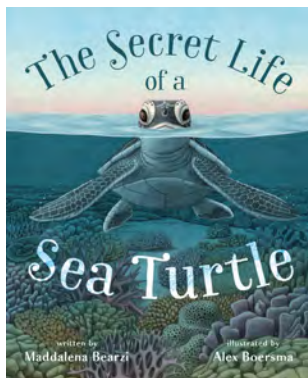


Maddalena Bearzi is a passionate scientist, active conservationist, photo-journalist, and published author of articles and books, including *Beautiful Minds: The Parallel Lives of Great Apes and Dolphins*, *Dolphin Confidential: Confessions of a Field Biologist*, and *Stranded: Finding Nature in Uncertain Times*. Maddalena was born and raised in Italy and now lives in Los Angeles, California, with her husband and dog.



Alex Boersma is a Canadian scientific illustrator. Her work runs the gamut of science media, from figures for scientific journals to children's book illustrations. Her clients have included the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, Stanford University's Hopkins Marine Station, and Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute, and her illustrations can be found in *The New York Times*, *National Geographic*, and *Nature Journal*. Her picture books include *The Whale Who Swam Through Time*, which she also co-wrote with Nick Pyenson.

ABOUT THE BOOK



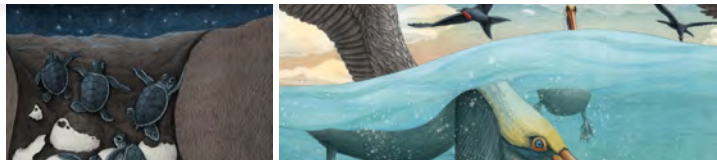
The Secret Life of a Sea Turtle
by Maddalena Bearzi; illustrated by Alex Boersma
Ages 4-8
On Sale May 13th, 2025

Follow the captivating yet perilous life of one sea turtle in this dazzling nonfiction tale by the co-founder of the Ocean Conservation Society, perfect for fans of Jason Chin's *Island*.

On a beach at the Ría Lagartos nature reserve in Mexico, a sea turtle is born.

Newly hatched into a big world, she breaks out of an egg buried in the sand. Now, her journey begins. To reach the ocean she must avoid predatory opossums, crabs, and raccoons—many of her siblings will not make it. But our sea turtle does, and when she finally dives beneath the blue sea, she'll travel for thousands of miles on a beautiful and pulse-pounding adventure.

Brilliant, informative, and compelling, ***The Secret Life of a Sea Turtle*** is a sweeping nonfiction tale following one turtle's extraordinary life from hatchling to adulthood, written by sea turtle expert and activist Maddalena Bearzi, and illustrated by rising star Alex Boersma.



PRAISE FOR *THE SECRET LIFE OF A SEA TURTLE*

★ “Employing language both precise and imaginative, marine biologist and conservationist Bearzi expertly describes the mechanics of sea turtles’ movements and morphology. Boersma’s stunning, intimate illustrations seamlessly complement the text, from a cutaway view of the nest to a gorgeous bird’s-eye view of unsuspecting baby turtles making sand trails in the shadow cast by the wing of an avian hunter. She captures her subjects’ every emotion: determination on the faces of hatchlings propelling themselves from the nest, fear in the eyes of an unlucky youngster grabbed by a crab. **Sweeping undersea scenes, including maps of ocean currents on the sea turtle’s journey, vividly illustrate the life of this wondrous creature. It’s all capped by in-depth backmatter**, including information on how readers can protect sea turtles and a look at several specific species. **Mesmerizing and insightful.**”—*Kirkus Reviews*, **starred review**

“A handsome, informative account of a green turtle’s life cycle.”—*Booklist*

“[A] lush species biography.”—*Publishers Weekly*

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