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Correction:

Area experts study possible turtle nursery off Key West

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Source:

Where is Annie? What about Hillary? The two juvenile green sea turtles, which biologists tagged with satellite transmitters at the St. Lucie Nuclear Plant earlier this year, are swimming in the waters off Key West -- and the same turtle experts hope for a reunion this week.

With a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, scientists with the nonprofit **Inwater Research Group** plan to collect data about the green sea turtles living in the Key West National Wildlife Refuge to confirm what might be the discovery of a new developmental habitat for the endangered species.

"We're still trying to find out if this is a new developmental habitat or if they're sharing foraging grounds with the adults," said Dean Bagley, a turtle researcher with the University of Central Florida. "No one has ever done work like this."

If the weather is calm, researchers also will travel west to the Dry Tortugas and Marquesas keys to find Annie and Hillary, who have traveled from the Treasure Coast to the site under study.

"It's all coming together," Bagley said. "It would be just awesome to see them again, but that's a needle in a haystack."

To collect blood and DNA samples to record gender and genetic data, the biologists have a unique way for capturing the turtles in the Keys' clear water. Instead of using nets in the strong currents, they'll do it "rodeo-style" -- jumping off the bow of the boat and wrestling the turtle out of the water.

Although **research** trips to the Keys began in 2002, the biologists recently received a \$90,000 federal grant to continue the study for three years. They plan to collect data four times a year -- although they worry the weather during winter months will make their work difficult.

Any information about turtle populations will help refuge managers protect the turtles -- possibly ones that grow up on the Treasure Coast and return to nest years later.

"You can't do a good job of conservation if you have big missing pieces in the biology of these animals," Bressette said.