

June 7, 2005

Turtles on the Move

If you are driving along a country road or highway in late spring and see a dark, saucer-sized object crossing in front of you, what do you do? Fortunately, an increasing number of people quickly realize that what they see is probably a turtle and immediately slow down to avoid hitting the animal. If safe to do so, many people will even get out of their vehicle and carefully usher the turtle across the road and away from danger. June is egg-laying month and turtles are on the move. However, all is not well in the turtle world.

Peterborough County is home to six species of turtles although only two are commonly seen. More disturbingly, four of the six species - Blanding's, musk, map and spotted - have been identified by COSEWIC (the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada) as species at risk. Our most common and widespread species is the Midland painted turtle, named for the bright yellow, orange and/or red coloured streaks on the head and neck. The snapping turtle, too, is quite common but is less frequently seen since it rarely basks in the sun. The beautiful Blanding's turtle is far less common than the aforementioned species but very attractive with its bright yellow throat and dome-like shell. In shallow bays of several of the Kawartha Lakes, you may also come across the small, often algae-covered musk turtle or stinkpot. This species spends most of its life under water. Watch also for map turtles as they sun themselves on rocks on some of our larger lakes such as Stoney. A wary species, females are often twice the size of painted turtles. Finally, we also have two records of the very rare spotted turtle. Small and secretive, spotted turtles probably still occur in a few wetlands in northern parts of the county.

The red-eared slider, a southern U.S. species commonly sold in pet shops, has also been seen in Peterborough County on at least one occasion. This is another in a long list of exotic plants and animals that are becoming established in southern Ontario waterbodies and wetlands. Sliders are now reported as being quite common in the Toronto area. It remains to be seen what effect they will have on our native turtle population. No plant or animal purchased in a pet shop should ever be released into the wild.

Starting in late May, turtles begin searching out nesting sites, preferably with well-drained, loose, sandy soil or fine gravel, hence the popularity of road shoulders. The female first of all scrapes out a hollow with her hind legs. Painted turtles lay five to ten white eggs, elliptical in shape and about two centimetres long. Snapping turtles, on the other hand, may lay as many as 70 eggs! They look remarkably like ping-pong balls but are much smaller. When the female turtle has finished laying, she uses her hind legs to fill in the hole and press down the earth around the eggs. She then drags her shell over the nest and sweeps the area with her hind feet as if to cover up any sign of her presence.

Unfortunately, turtle eggs stand a very poor chance of surviving the 90-day incubation period. Predators such as raccoons and skunks usually discover the nests within a matter of hours, dig up the eggs and enjoy a hearty meal. They leave behind a familiar sight of crinkled, white shells scattered around the nest area. Since these predators tend to flourish anywhere there is human settlement - raccoons may be as much as 20 times more abundant than 50 years ago - very few turtle nests go undiscovered. Accordingly, you can help our somewhat beleaguered turtle population by not feeding raccoons and by assuring that they do not get into your garbage.

Temperature also plays an important role in the lives of turtles. Curiously enough, the eventual sex of the baby turtles depends on the temperature at which the eggs are incubated. Warmer temperatures (30 C and greater) result in all females being born, while cooler temperatures (22 C to 26 C) result in only males. However, if the weather is overly cool, the eggs will simply not hatch at all. This is particularly true of snapping turtle eggs.

Much is being done in Peterborough County to learn more about our local turtle population, the

overall health of freshwater ecosystems and to rehabilitate turtles that have been injured by automobiles. Through Project Turtlewatch, a Trent University initiative, residents of the Kawartha Lakes region are being encouraged to keep track of turtles they may see and to report their observations to a coordinated databank. Because turtles have low reproductive rates and are under so much stress these days, populations in decline can't easily bounce back. By keeping track of turtle numbers in particular locations from year to year, we are not only learning about turtle population trends but are gaining valuable information on the habitats that sustain them. Turtles can serve as indicator species that might reflect conditions affecting an entire natural community. For more information, go to www.trentu.ca/biology/turtlewatch/ or send an email to Turtlewatch@trentu.ca.

Located at the Riverview Park and Zoo, the Kawartha Turtle Trauma Centre provides medical, surgical and rehabilitative care to injured native turtles in order to eventually release them back into their natural habitat. Roadkill is one of the most significant causes of mortality and most of the turtles being killed are nesting females. The adult female is extremely important to the survival of the population. Dr. Ron Brooks, professor at the University of Guelph, warns that even the loss of 1-2% of adults annually from the "extra" mortality of roadkill can, and will, inevitably push turtle populations toward extinction. Because so few turtles ever reach sexual maturity - females don't reproduce until they are 18 years of age - each adult turtle is part of an extremely important group. This is why it is so important to rehabilitate as many injured turtles as possible - especially females - and return them to the wild. As long as they can avoid human-related threats such as cars, turtles can live and breed for many years and thereby perpetuate the species. It is believed snapping turtles can live for over 100 years! If you find an injured turtle, take it to the Trauma Centre (748-9301 ext. 2304), Peterborough Pet Hospital or Champlain Animal Hospital. It is astounding how much can be done to successfully treat injured turtles. For successful release of the patient, however, it's important to provide detailed information of the exact location where the turtle was found. You can visit the Kawartha Turtle Trauma Centre website at www.kawarthaturtle.org/.

If you see a turtle on the road, consider stopping and moving it to the shoulder in the direction it was heading. However, make sure that there is no danger from oncoming traffic before you perform the rescue. Remember, too, that the snapping turtle is the only species that can harm you. You can push a snapping turtle along with a stout stick or lift or pull it, holding onto the rear of the shell. Be sure to wash your hands thoroughly afterwards. If you find a turtle nest, you can give the eggs a fighting chance by temporarily covering the nest with a well-secured wire mesh to discourage predators.

What to Watch for This Week:

June is a great month for butterflies. Both the black swallowtail and the Canadian Tiger Swallowtail should be flying any time now. They are often seen attracted to lilacs. Most years, early June is also the time when the first Monarchs return to the Kawarthas.

Drew Monkman is a local naturalist, teacher and author of *Nature's Year in the Kawarthas*.