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LIVING

Snakes? Learn to love 'em

You can help catalogue local reptiles and amphibians for ambitious Ontario atlas

When, at best, you tend to be small and inconspicuous, or, at worst, inspire fear and disgust, it's hard to get the public to pay much attention to you. Such is the predicament faced by most of Ontario's reptiles and amphibians. If it was just business as usual, this might be fine. However, our frogs, snakes and turtles are becoming increasingly rare, and there's every possibility that some species will disappear completely from the province.



Drew Monkman

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

In fact, three-quarters (18 of 24) of Ontario's reptile species are listed as being at risk. They are actually the most at risk group of species in Canada. Right here in Peterborough County, our only turtle species that is NOT at risk is the painted turtle. Although Ontario's amphibians have not been hit quite as hard, the global situation is dire. A full 33% are listed as declining. For example, the chytrid fungus is believed to be responsible for catastrophic declines in frog populations in South and Central America, often in pristine mountain habitats.

Reptiles and amphibians are collectively known as herpetofauna. They represent a unique part of Ontario's biodiversity. Peterborough County is home to 17 species of reptiles (six turtles, one lizard and nine snakes) and 17 species of amphibians (nine frogs, one toad, and seven salamanders). Some of our at risk reptiles include the spotted turtle (endangered), snapping turtle, Blanding's turtle, map turtle, five-lined skink, eastern hog-nosed snake, and eastern milksnake.

If these fascinating animals are to remain part of Ontario's heritage of biodiversity, we need to find out a lot more about them. In particular, we require accurate, up-to-date information about what species are where and in what numbers. Even now, previously unknown populations of rare herpetofaunal species are still being discovered. In addition, it's vitally important to increase the public's awareness of these species and the serious threats they are facing.

Therefore, in the spring of 2009, the Ontario Reptile and Amphibian atlas was launched by Ontario Nature, in partnership with the Natural Heritage Information Centre (NHIC), located here in Peterborough, and the Eastern Ontario Model Forest (EOMF). The information collected by the atlas is urgently needed to monitor trends in species' distributions and abundance, assess species population status, and identify and manage important habitat for rare species.

For readers who are not familiar with Ontario Nature, the charitable organization protects wild species and wild spaces through conservation, education and public engagement. I highly recommend anyone with an interest in conservation to join.

An earlier atlas, known as the Ontario Herpetofaunal Summary Atlas, was begun in 1984 by Mike Oldham of NHIC. However, more up-to-date information is now needed. If, for example, a



JOE CROWLEY photo
Five-lined skink

can be taken to protect the population.

Another main objective of the new atlas project is to collect observation submissions from the general public. You can become a "citizen scientist" by submitting your sightings. The project wants observations of all reptile and amphibian species, not just the rare ones. So, when you're out and about - at your cottage or on a camping trip, for example - just keep note of what reptiles and amphibians you come across and where.

BE A 'CITIZEN SCIENTIST'

Observations can be submitted online at www.ontarionature.org. The website also has links to an Excel spreadsheet (useful for submitting multiple observations) and even a printable

developer wants to build a subdivision in a given area, it might be possible to tell him or her that a population of at-risk species is known to live there. In this way, mitigation measures

data card that can be mailed in. If none of these options are convenient, you can even phone in observations by calling John Urquhart at (416) 444-8419 ext. 243.

You can also report observations from the past as long as you're certain of the species, approximate date, and location. Again, do not hesitate to submit observations of common species. However, rather than reporting them individually, you may want to simply say that over a season you saw or heard a given number of garter snakes or spring peepers in a specific area. According to Joe Crowley, the atlas coordinator, an even more important kind of data you can provide is that of road-killed animals. Submitting data about animals on the road, dead or alive, provides important information as to how big a threat a given road might be. People are also encouraged to submit photographs, especially when snakes and turtles are involved.

Each summer Ontario Nature delivers presentations and training workshops for groups participating in the atlas project. They provide an overview of the local reptiles and amphibians and techniques and tips for surveying for them. Workshops, intended for groups of at least 10 people, provide hands-on training that is done while actually surveying an area of local inter-

est. For example, landowners' or cottagers' associations may be interested in booking a presentation on the atlas or a survey workshop. For more information, contact Joe Crowley at joec@ontarionature.org

ROADS EQUAL DANGER

There are many reasons for the declines in reptiles and amphibians, but habitat loss represents the biggest danger. Related to this are other similar threats such as habitat fragmentation (i.e. splitting a habitat into smaller parts, usually because of roads), road mortality, and roads in general. Seeing a picture of Ontario's road network is a real eye-opener. The network is massive and incredibly dense, especially in the south. It's even worse if you include the logging roads of central and northern Ontario. In southwestern Ontario, there is almost nowhere you can go where you are further than a kilometre or two from a road. Unfortunately, where there is high road density, there is also substantial habitat loss and road kill.

The threats don't stop there, however. Illegal collection and on-going human persecution also represent significant problems. In an Ontario study (Ashley, Kosloski, and Petrie. 2007) done on the response of motor vehicle drivers to a fake turtle, fake snake, and a litter item frequently found on the road (i.e., dis-



DREW MONKMAN photo

Joe Crowley, who coordinates the Ontario Reptile and Amphibian atlas project for Ontario Nature, with a perfectly harmless eastern milksnake.

Reptile tracker

You too can learn how to identify, record and report the snakes and turtles you see to the Ontario Reptile and Amphibian atlas project.

What: A local workshop offered by the atlas project in collaboration with the Kawartha Turtle Trauma Centre and the Peterborough Field Naturalists.

When: June 13.

To register: Visit the KTTC's event page at <http://peterboroughnature.org/events.htm>

For more information about Ontario's reptiles and amphibians and the atlas program, visit the atlas website at www.ontarionature.org/atlas. You will find identification tips, how to best survey for reptiles and amphibians, as well as links to other useful information.



JOE CROWLEY photo

Spotted turtle

posable cup), it was found that approximately 2.7% of motorists intentionally hit the "reptiles." While 2.7% may sound low, on a moderately high traffic road it means that most slow-moving snakes and turtles will not make it across alive.

There are still a lot of misconceptions about reptiles and amphibians. A significant number of people are still terrified by Ontario's snakes despite the fact that they are harmless, with the exception of the rare and docile Massasauga rattlesnake, a snake that will only bite if stepped on or picked up. People need to know that snakes are not going to hurt them and are simply a key part of a healthy ecosystem. This kind of education is a huge first step in assuring long-term protection for these creatures.

According to Crowley, a significant number of people falsely believe that they are terrified of snakes. He says that when he is doing field work in public areas, people will often come up and ask somewhat cautiously what he is doing with a snake. After he's talked to them for a few minutes about the true nature of snakes, many previously fearful individuals are practically allowing the animal to crawl all over them!

Crowley hopes to print an atlas within five years with maps showing distribution and population levels as well as lots of other information on the province's reptiles and amphibians. For the first few years, atlas data will be available only online. It will be updated every year that the program runs.

Drew Monkman is a Peterborough teacher and author of *Nature's Year in the Kawarthas*. He can be reached at dmonkman1@cogeco.ca. Visit his website and see past columns at www.drew-monkman.com.