

localnews

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LIVING

Spring is turtle watch time

Roadsides are common but dangerous nesting spot

My earliest memories of fascination with the natural world all revolve around turtles. I was intrigued by these creatures and, more than anything, wanted to catch them. I remember spending many a summer morning in a swamp near my grandparents' cottage, literally up to my waist in the water and hot in pursuit of painted turtles. When I would catch one, I'd bring it back to the cottage, put it in one of my grandmother's tin laundry tubs and feed it live frogs. What great entertainment for a nine year old!



Drew Monkman

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Late May and June is when people most often see turtles. This is the egg-laying season and turtles are on the move. However, all is not well in the turtle world. Peterborough County might be home to as many as eight species of turtles, although only two are commonly seen. More disturbingly, six of these species – snapping, Blanding's, musk, map, spotted, and wood – have been classified by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) as species at risk. The Ministry of Natural Resources lists five of these turtles as species at risk, having not yet evaluated the status of the snapping turtle.

Midland painted turtle: Our most common and widespread species, the painted turtle is named for the bright yellow, orange and/or red coloured streaks on the head and neck. The shell is dark green above and yellow below with a central dark blotch. Painted turtles are very conspicuous because they often gather in large numbers on logs or rocks to bask in the sun. This species is still common and widespread in Ontario.

Snapping turtle: Easily identifiable by the serrated edges at the rear margin of the shell and its often massive size as an adult, the snapping turtle is usually seen only in May and June. Snappers seldom leave the water except to nest or to migrate to another location. They almost never bask in the sun. Although still present in strong numbers in many locations locally, the Natural Heritage Information Centre at MNR now lists the snapping turtle as vulnerable to eventual disappearance from the province.

Blanding's turtle: The Blanding's turtle is one of our most attractive species and easily identifiable by its dome-like shell and bright yellow throat. There are still strong numbers of Blanding's turtle in our area but many populations are small and disconnected. MNR considers this species to be "threatened," meaning it might become endangered in Ontario if limiting factors are not reversed.

Musk turtle: In shallow bays of sev-



RICK STANKIEWICZ photos

A snapping turtle (main photo) and painted turtle (inset), both in the process of laying eggs.

eral of the Kawartha Lakes, you might also come across the small, often algae-covered musk turtle, also known as the stinkpot. This species almost never leaves the water. It, too, is listed by MNR as threatened.

Map turtles: Watch for this species sunning themselves on rocks on some of our larger lakes such as Stoney and Rice. Females are often twice the size of painted turtles. The shell is covered by an intricate network of map-like yellow lines, giving it its name. Map turtles are very wary and flee to the water when approached. Its MNR status is "special concern," which means it is sensitive to human activities or natural events.

Spotted turtle: We also have several records of the very rare spotted turtle in Peterborough County but no recent sightings have been confirmed. Small and secretive, the spotted turtle has a smooth black shell with conspicuous bright yellow spots. It is listed as endangered under the provincial Endangered Species Act, 2007.

Wood turtle: Whether wood turtles are – or were – found in Peterborough County is unclear. There have been some unconfirmed reports, however. Several very small populations of wood turtles continue to precariously hang on in a few other parts of the province. A mostly terrestrial species, the dark brown shell of the wood turtle is grooved with concentric growth rings, giving it the appearance of a piece of wood, hence the turtle's name. Wood turtles in Ontario are in decline due to habitat loss and over collection. They, too, are listed as endangered.

Red-eared slider: The adult slider is superficially similar to the painted turtle in appearance. It is a non-native species that is commonly sold at pet stores. Unfortunately, disenchanted pet owners continue to release them into the wild where they represent a threat to native turtles. This species has been seen at Beavermead Park in Peterborough, and there are reports from other locations in the county. Sliders are well-established elsewhere in southern Ontario, however, particularly in the GTA.

The Natural Heritage Information Centre, located in the MNR building in Peterborough, welcomes reports of any local turtle species (except painted), with as precise as possible a location and preferably documented by a photo. Reports can be submitted online at http://nhic.mnr.gov.on.ca/species/species_report.cfm

Starting in late May, turtles begin searching out nesting sites, preferably with well-drained, loose, sandy soil or fine gravel. This explains the popularity of road shoulders. The female first scrapes out a hollow with her hind legs. Painted turtles lay five to 10 white eggs, elliptical in shape and about two centimetres long. Snapping turtles, on the other hand, might 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.

Roadkill, too, is a very significant cause of turtle mortality, especially during the nesting season as turtles cross roads on their way to nesting sites. Even worse, many of the turtles being killed are females. Killing pregnant females not only removes reproductive adults from the population, it also means all their potential future offspring are lost. There is no way that the surviving turtles can lay extra eggs to compensate for increased mortality. According to Dr. Ron Brooks, professor at the University of Guelph, even a loss of one per cent to two per cent of adults annually from the "extra" mortality of roadkill will eventually cause a given population to completely disappear.

So, what can drivers do? It's mostly a matter of watching the road carefully when you're driving, especially when traveling near wetlands or rivers. Simply slow down and be attentive. If you see a turtle on the road, consider stopping and moving it to the shoulder in the direction it was heading. However,

Turtle Trauma Centre to the rescue

Since June of 2002 the Kawartha Turtle Trauma Centre (KTTC) has been saving injured native turtles and releasing them back into their natural habitat. 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!

KTTC has now moved to a new location at 730 Hawley St. near Erskine Avenue. However, they will not be set up to admit new "patients" until later this summer. At the moment they are asking anyone who finds an injured turtle to contact the Toronto Wildlife Centre (416-631-0662) or Midland Wildlife Centre (705-534-4350) directly to arrange to drop off the animal. KTTC is also looking for volunteers – "turtle taxi drivers" – to help shuttle turtles from Peterborough to these centres. Once they have enough drivers, they'll be able to set up designated local drop-off locations like they've done in the past.

KTTC also really needs help with fundraising and grant writing. A fundraising committee has just been established to raise money to pay rent since the space they are in is not donated. They are also looking for volunteers to help give turtle talks, write for their newsletter, and a volunteer webmaster and handyman.

If you would like to help out but don't have time to volunteer, you are most welcome to become members or donate. Individual/family memberships cost \$25/year and include a newsletter. Corporate memberships cost \$100 and include the newsletter and a framed certificate for display. Donations can be made online through CanadaHelps.org or by mailing a cheque to the Kawartha Turtle Trauma Centre KTTC c/o Riverview Park and Zoo, PO Box 4125 Peterborough ON K9J 6Z5.

For more information, go to www.kawarthaturtle.org. You can also contact the centre at info@kawarthaturtle.org or leave a message on the centre phone at 741-5000. Messages are checked daily.

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.

To be continued next week...

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.drewmonkman.com.