

localnews

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LIVING

Turtles and traffic a tragic mix

All but one of six local species are at risk, so keep a sharp eye out on rural roads

With the arrival of June, turtles are once again on the move. Unfortunately, this migration of mostly female turtles to nesting sites usually involves a hazardous trek across busy roads and highways. Clearly, a turtle's shell is not match for the crushing weight of a motor vehicle. The result is that thousands of turtles are killed or injured by cars and trucks in the Kawartha each spring and summer. The carnage is devastating for turtle populations since egg-bearing adult females are usually the victims.



DREW MONKMAN

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

On the bright side, however, an increasing number of people are now aware of the potential presence of turtles on the road and are adjusting their driving accordingly. It is not hard to avoid striking a turtle if you are driving at a reasonable speed and looking ahead to see if there is anything on the road.

Starting in late May, turtles begin searching out a place to lay their eggs, preferably with well-drained, loose, sandy soil or fine gravel. This helps to explain the popularity of road shoulders as nesting sites. The female scrapes out a hollow with her hind legs before proceeding to lay. Painted Turtles lay five to 10 white eggs, elliptical in shape and about two centimetres long. Snapping Turtles may lay as many as 70 eggs! They look remarkably like ping-pong balls but are much smaller. When the 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.

MOST ARE RARELY SEEN

Peterborough County is home to six species of turtles although only two, the Midland Painted Turtle and the Snapping Turtle, are commonly seen. With the exception of the Painted, all of our local turtles have been classified by the Ministry of Natural Resources as species at risk. The situation for Spotted Turtles is so critical that they are now listed as endangered, meaning they face imminent extinction or extirpation. Both the Blanding's and Eastern Musk turtles are classified as threatened. The Snapping Turtle, along with the Northern Map Turtle, are designated as species of Special Concern.

Turtle populations are in decline for a number of reasons. First of all, turtle eggs stand a very poor chance of surviving the long incubation period. Predators such as raccoons and skunks usually discover the nests within the first 48 hours after laying, 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 – rac-



Kawartha Turtle Trauma Centre photo

The Snapping Turtle (top photo) is listed as a species of concern in Ontario. Above, Dr. Sue Carstairs of the Kawartha Turtle Trauma Centre releases a snapper.

coons are probably 20 times more abundant than 50 years ago – very few turtle nests go undiscovered. You can help our beleaguered turtle populations by not feeding raccoons and by assuring that they do not get into your garbage.

NESTING SEASON

As already mentioned, roadkill is also a very significant cause of turtle mortality, especially during the June nesting season. Killing pregnant females not only removes reproductive adults from the population, but it also means all their potential future offspring are lost as well. According to Dr. Ron Brooks, professor at the University of Guelph,

even a loss of 1% to 2% of adults annually from the "extra" mortality of roadkill will eventually lead to the disappearance of local populations.

So, what can drivers do to protect turtles? It's mostly a matter of slowing down and watching the road carefully at this time of year, especially when traveling near wetlands, lakes and rivers. If you see a turtle on the road, consider stopping and moving it to the shoulder in the direction it was heading. Don't return them to the side of the road that they came from, because they will simply turn around and march right back into the traffic. You must, of course, be sure that there is no danger

from oncoming cars before you perform this kind of intervention.

SNAPPER SAFETY

If the turtle is small, you can simply carry it across the road. If you are dealing with a Snapping Turtle (which, of course can bite) the safest technique is to push and prod the animal along with a stout stick or shovel. You can also lift or pull the turtle, holding onto the rear of the shell. A Snapper's beak can reach back to its midpoint so do not pick it up near the middle of the shell. Nor should you ever pick up a turtle by the tail, since this may damage its spine. It is also important not to straddle a Snap-



MARK STANKIEWICZ photo



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ping Turtle with your car. Snappers jump up when they feel threatened, thereby hitting the undercarriage of the vehicle as it passes over them. This results in serious head trauma and shearing injuries to the carapace.

As for nesting turtles, you should never dig up a turtle nest in order to protect the eggs. You may damage them and it is also against the law. However, if you find a nest that has been disturbed by a predator, carefully place the eggs back in the hole and bury them, or bring the eggs to the Kawartha Turtle Trauma Centre (see below) to be incubated. Record the location of the nest as precisely as possible and be careful to keep the eggs right side up during transport. You can also help to protect new nests by lightly sweeping the surface of the nests (to disperse the scent) or temporarily covering the nest with a board for the first few days. If a turtle is nesting on your property, keep an eye out for hatchlings from late August until snow and then again in spring the next year.

TO THE RESCUE

Since June 2002, the Kawartha Turtle Trauma Centre (KTTC) has been saving injured native turtles and releasing them back to where they were initially found. 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 essential to rehabilitate turtles – especially females – that have been injured as a result of run-ins with vehicles. As long as they can avoid human-related threats, turtles can live and breed for decades and thereby perpetuate the species.

If you find an injured turtle, call the KTTC at 705-741-5000. Do not email because an injured animal needs medical attention as soon as possible. Remember to note the location (road, major intersections and/or distance from a given landmark) where the turtle was found. This is necessary so the

turtle can be released back into the wild according to provincial regulations. Carefully place the injured animal in a well-ventilated container – plastic, if possible – with a secure lid. Do not transport turtles in water and do not offer them food. KTTC is primarily volunteer run and does not have a pick-up service. Be sure to visit the KTTC website at kawarthaturtle.org. The website also has the names of other wildlife rehabilitation centres in Ontario that treat injured turtles.

As I have often mentioned in this column, nearly all of Ontario's reptiles and amphibians are becoming increasingly rare. In fact, three quarters (18 of 24) of Ontario's reptile species are listed as species at risk. In order to monitor changes in the ranges of these animals and fluctuations in their population numbers, volunteers are needed to submit their observations of reptiles and amphibians. Take note of the date and location and report your sighting to the Ontario Reptile and Amphibian Atlas. Observations can be submitted via an online form by going to the Atlas website at bit.ly/9YX1DH

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