

The Glengarry News

All eight of Ontario's native turtle species declared 'at risk'

June 20 2018 BY TARA MACDONALD News Staff

Nesting Season: Turtles are on the move!

Turtle nesting seasons is well underway in Glengarry which means you'll be seeing lots of turtles throughout the county in the coming month. The most common turtles in Eastern Ontario are the Blandings, Painted and Snapping Turtles.

Each year, from late May to early July, Female turtles leave creeks, rivers and marshes to lay their eggs on land. However, road mortality is one of the biggest threats facing freshwater turtles as many die each spring when they are hit by cars while attempting to cross roads in search of a place to lay their eggs.

All eight of Ontario's native turtle species declared 'at risk'

A female turtle starts breeding at around 20 years of age and can live to be over 100 years old! Sadly, due to loss of habitat and road mortalities, many of these turtles may never reach maturity or contribute to repopulation of the species.

As of April 2018, all eight of Ontario's turtle species were declared 'at risk' by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC), a body of wildlife agents from governments, Indigenous and non-profit entities.

How you can help protect the future of Ontario's turtles

The Raisin River Conservation Authorities urges residents to watch for turtles crossing roads and help them to safety when it is safe to do so. By keeping an eye out for turtles while driving and helping them to safely cross roads, we can support the long-term survival of Ontario's turtles.

How to help a turtle cross the road safely

When attempting to help a turtle cross the road, you'll want to make sure that both you and the turtle are protected. For your next turtle rescue, here are a few tips to keep in mind:

1. When driving, pull over to the side of the road if it is clear and safe to do so. Use your four-way hazard lights to help alert oncoming traffic to slow down, and most importantly always stop and check both ways before crossing the road;
2. Never pick up a turtle by their tail as this can damage their spine;
3. Always move turtles in the direction they are headed. Otherwise, they will double back and try to cross the road again.

Smaller turtles - such as the painted turtle - can be easily be picked up and carried to safely. However, other larger species - such as snapping turtles - requires more caution. When you encounter a snapping turtle in need of assistance, please use these additional precautions:

Approach snapping turtles from behind as they have long necks and can bite;

Snapping turtles may be picked up by placing your hands on the back of the shell at either side of the tail. In this position, the turtle will not be able to bite you;

There are two ways to safely move a snapping turtle. Smaller turtles can be carried from the back of the shell alongside the tail to the other side of the road while larger turtles require a different approach.

Option 1. If you are comfortable handling a snapping turtle, place one hand on the side of its top shell beside its tail and the other hand beneath his shell to support the turtle and carry it safely across the road and gently place it down.

Option 2. Another option is to grab the back of the shell, you lift the turtle and assist it across the road much like pushing a wheel-barrow. If the turtle is too heavy to lift or resisting moving forward, you can drag the turtle around and drag it across the road. Turtles have a tough shell and will be able to sustain the scraping if it means saving them from being run over by a car. To facilitate dragging the turtle across the road, you can also slide it onto a car mat or piece of cardboard which will act as a sled. Make sure to hold the back of the shell while you slide the turtle across the road so it doesn't turn around and snap at you.

Option 3. Finally, if all else fails, you can try encouraging the turtle to bite down on a stick or rubber car mat and then gently drag the turtle to safety.

Found an injured turtle? Here's what to do!

If you find an injured turtle, carefully place it in a box or plastic container with a secure lid. Remember that even if the turtle can't be saved, wildlife rehabilitation staff may be able to save the eggs inside the turtle.

Once you have the turtle safely secured, you can drop it off at Rideau Valley Wildlife Sanctuary in North Gower, Ontario. For more information, call 613-258-9480.

To find out more about Ontario's turtles and how you can help and protect turtle populations in Glengarry, check out next week's paper featuring an interview with the Raisin River Conservation Authority.