

Turtle nesting season underway in North Hastings



By Nate Smelle

Currently, seven of Ontario's eight species of turtles are listed under the Ontario Endangered Species Act, 2007 as species at-risk. This is because everyday turtle populations are in jeopardy due to several threats, including: habitat loss and fragmentation, the exotic wild animal/pet trade, road mortality, and nest predation.

When nesting occurs throughout the province each year from early May until mid-July, Ontario's turtles face the most dangerous time in their life cycle. During this time, female turtles travel in search of a nesting site, often returning to the same location year after year. While beaches and shorelines provide ideal nesting sites for turtles, because the sand and gravel shoulders of roads offer similar conditions, they too are often selected as nesting sites.

When turtles are on the move, so is Think Turtle Conservation Initiative's managing director Kelly Wallace. Working in collaboration with other environmental stewards, Wallace and her team of 'Turtle Guardians' monitor and protect nesting sites throughout North Hastings.

Given the worldwide pause in human activity due to the COVID-19 pandemic, leading up to the 2021 nesting season she was hopeful that this year turtle populations in Ontario would benefit. So far that has not been the case.

'I truly wish that I could report that the turtles have benefited by the pause in human activity during the pandemic,' Wallace said.

'We had hoped this year the turtles would fare better, but so far this turtle season the challenges turtles are facing negotiating these times has escalated, especially in terms of road mortality, habitat loss and illegal wildlife activities.'

For example, in terms of road mortality, Wallace said by June 14 nearly 600 injured turtles had been admitted to the Ontario Turtle Conservation Centre and home of Ontario's turtle hospital.

The number of injured turtles climbed sharply during the first half of June, with some 350 turtles being admitted by June 1.

Of the injured turtles admitted to the OTCC, Wallace said some 90 per cent are the result of a turtle being struck by a motor vehicle. She is concerned that the situation for turtles will only grow worse now that the province has transitioned into Step-1 of its re-opening plan and more motorists will be on the roads.

"The high number of injured turtles admitted to the OTCC is largely a reflection of poor driving practices," explained Wallace.

"This is confirmed by Ontario regional police reports that the number of tickets issued for speeding and distracted driving throughout Ontario has more than doubled during the pandemic."

Highlighting how many motorists might be tempted to speed up when driving on a long, quiet stretch of rural road, Wallace said it is important for drivers to remember that they share the roads with wildlife. She said the safest thing a driver can do to protect turtles, and people, is be alert to the road ahead and follow the speed limit.

Although some drivers consider the lives of wildlife to be less important than people, Wallace said the fact is that everyone depends on and benefits from the role wildlife plays in maintaining a healthy functioning ecosystems. These essential ecosystem services "make the lives of wildlife of the utmost importance," she said.

Wallace continued, "There is not an infinite supply of natural resources available to us and unintentionally pushing any species to the brink of extinction has far reaching effects. Some species of turtles in Ontario are getting nearer to extinction each year due to habitat loss, road mortality, poaching, pollution and many other factors. Protecting one species by virtue of the interconnections we share with nature and the interdependence makes it essential to protect that which protects us."

Acknowledging how essential these services are to people's quality of life and future, Wallace said everyone has a part in protecting life on earth. If the pandemic has taught people anything, she said it is that "working together we can accomplish so much."

Wild spaces providing turtles and other wildlife with suitable natural habitat continue to disappear at an unprecedented rate due to land and shoreline development. In this regard, Wallace said turtles have become more endangered during the pandemic since many people in Ontario have taken to lifestyle changes that include leaving the city and relocating to rural communities, cottage country or suburban communities. As a result, she said there has been a surge in property renovations, new home building, commercial construction, shoreline development and property upgrades so that land or properties once used as cottages can now be used as year round residences.

Overall, Wallace said the pandemic has generated an increase in land development, urban sprawl, industry development and general re-allocating of land use. All of these types of development unintentionally have the potential of causing wildlife habitat loss, fragmenting wildlife corridors and/or causing home range disturbances for many wildlife species, she said.

Wallace recommends for anyone looking to purchase a new home or property in cottage country or rural communities on the outskirts of urban centres in Ontario to speak with their real estate agent to inquire if there is any established turtle activity on the property that they should be made aware of. No matter where one might be in Ontario, if a turtle nest is accidentally unearthed during construction, she said the Ontario Turtle Conservation Centre should be called at: 705-741-5000. Wallace said the OTCC will provide medical care for any injured turtles; and, will even incubate turtle eggs at no charge to the home owner or the person who reports the incident. She also noted that the OTCC have "turtle taxi" volunteers to assist with the transportation of injured turtles or eggs from anywhere in Ontario.

Wallace said injured or deceased turtles can also be reported to this same number. To increase awareness and help protect Ontario's turtle populations, she said it is important to report turtle sightings.

"Citizens that report turtle sightings are supplying valuable data that can help fill in ecological gaps locally and provincially," explained Wallace.

"Every turtle sighting reported offers information pertaining to distribution, seasonal habitats, home range, species status, behavior, the influence of environmental variables, identify road mortality hot spots and so much more. Your input has the potential to assist with protecting turtles, helping prevent road mortality, learning how to coexist with wildlife, species recovery efforts and increasing awareness."