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SAVING TURTLES IN NORTHUMBERLAND



Karen Longwell / Northumberland News

GORES LANDING -- Jeannette Paziuk, a Willow Beach Field Naturalist member, joined a group of volunteers who helped move turtle eggs (inset) from Close Point Road on Rice Lake before construction started on the road. **Feature story, page 7. Editorial, page 6**

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Volunteers help rescue turtles in Gores Landing area

Turtle populations dwindling due to habitat loss and roads

Karen Longwell

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GORES LANDING — Hundreds of baby turtles now have a fighting chance thanks to a small group of volunteers.

Nearly 20 volunteers gathered in shifts in early August to move egg nests on Close Point Road on Rice Lake in Gores Landing before road construction started. There were about 40 turtle nests buried along the road side, said Joan Norris, a resident who helped organize the volunteers. Each nest could have 30 or more eggs. The road is known to be a snapping turtle, painted and map turtle nest site. Close Point Road or Causeway is a private road. Norris said moving the eggs can kill the developing baby turtles but the planned construction on the road was much worse for the eggs.

“If it wasn’t for these volunteers — baby turtles would be dead,” said Norris.

Volunteers came from several groups such as the Willow Beach Field Naturalists, Trent University, and the Northumberland Land Trust.

The turtle eggs were moved to the Ontario Turtle Conservation Centre in Selwyn (formerly the Kawartha Turtle Trauma Centre) and a newly created turtle nesting habitat at the Black Oak Savannah in Alderville.

Northumberland Land Trust members David and Micheline Beevis were among the volunteers and said they recently visited the Ontario Turtle Conservation Centre with their grandchildren.

“We were inspired (to volunteer) by the centre,” said David.

Norris said she came to understand the plight of turtles living on Close Point Road.

“They (turtles) don’t seem to get a break,” she said.

The biggest threat to turtles is on roads. As new construction, roads continue to grow across southern Ontario, turtle numbers are dwindling, said Joe Crowley, species at risk expert herpetologist with the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR). Across southern Ontario, about 72 per cent of wet lands have been lost to development and agriculture since the 1800s, said Crowley.

“The (turtle) habitat loss has been extremely high,” he said.

A bigger concern to adult turtles is death on roadways.

“Road mortality is the biggest ongoing threat.”

While turtles lay 40 to 50 eggs in a nest only about one or two turtles tend to survive from that nest, said Crowley. The eggs are subject to predators such as raccoons, foxes and coyotes. Humans collecting certain types of turtles to sell is also a concern. In the past turtles made up for that low mortality by living a long life. A turtle can live to 75 years old but with road deaths, the population continues to decline. Saving just one turtle from injury is important to the overall population, he said.

“Most populations in Ontario are in bad shape.”

Female turtles in particular are attracted to roads, such as Close Point Road, to lay their eggs. A road with sandy soil and lots of sun is a perfect place to lay eggs for many types of turtles. Snapping turtles typically nest close to water and have been known to cross overland distances greater than 10 kilometres to find suitable nesting sites.

In the Rice Lake area there are several different types of turtles that are of concern, said Crowley. The eastern musk turtle, snapping turtle and northern map are all



Submitted photos

NORTHUMBERLAND -- Joan Norris helped bring signs and a new speed limit (right) to Close Point Road for snapping turtle preservation back in 2014. Turtles crossing roads (left) is the biggest threat to the species.

listed as special concern under the Endangered Species Act. This means the MNR is watching these turtle populations but they don’t get habitat protection, he said.

“We are keeping an eye on them,” he said. They could move to a higher level on the protected list, if the population becomes too low.

Another turtle found in the area, the Blanding’s turtle is listed as threatened. As a threatened species the MNR will get involved if a new development could disrupt a Blanding’s turtle habitat.

Under the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act it is illegal to kill, harm or collect protected species. While snapping turtles were once on a list as a game species, they can now no longer be harvested. Damaging or moving a turtle egg nest is not permitted without proper authorization. The egg shells are rubbery, not hard and moving the eggs can kill the embryo. Under special circumstances — such as road construction — the eggs can be moved to protect them, said Crowley. Under most circumstances Crowley advises not touching an egg nest. If found Crowley suggests reporting egg nests to the MNR (www.ontario.ca/page/ministry-natural-resources-and-forestry) or to the Ontario Reptile and Amphibian Atlas (www.ontarionature.org).

Norris said she contacted the MNR for permission to move the eggs. As she has moved eggs once before because of construction, she was aware of the correct way to move the very delicate eggs.

“The eggs are fragile,” said Donnell Gasbarrini, turtle programs manager with the Ontario Turtle Conservation Centre. The centre took 692 eggs, which have been kept in vermiculite to keep them from drying out. As of Aug. 11, Gasbarrini said the eggs were doing well.

“We already have some starting to hatch,” she said.

The eggs could hatch any time from mid-August or September, said Gasbarrini. Surviving turtles will be released back in a suitable area near where they were found on Rice Lake, she said.

For more information:

VISIT www.ontarioturtle.ca

Page 6 - Today’s editorial

How to help turtles cross the street:

- Always be sure of your own safety before stopping to help a turtle on the road. Gently move the turtle in the direction she is going. Do not handle the turtle any more than is necessary. Once you have moved it across the road retreat a respectful distance if you wish to continue observing it.
- Most turtles can be picked up carefully with two hands. But careful helping a snapping turtle across the road — keep a safe distance from their head as they will snap at you if they feel threatened.
- An uninjured snapper can be coaxed across the road using a shovel or a board, or by allowing it to bite a long stick and pulling it across the road.
- If you must pick up a snapper by hand, do so by sliding fingers behind the turtle’s hind legs, with the tail between your hands and gripping the shell between your fingers and thumbs. You may also slide one hand under the turtle’s belly to grab a hold of the plastron (the belly shell). Snappers are very strong and will squirm and thrash their hind legs making it difficult to hold on.
- A snapper can reach it’s midpoint so do not pick it up near its middle.
- Never pick up a turtle by the tail; you may damage its spine.

Turtle fast facts:

- Turtles are a long-lived species- snapping turtles may in fact have a lifespan of over 100 years.
- The vast majority of hatchlings and juveniles do not survive.
- Turtles do not reach maturity until they are eight-20 years old.
- Turtles are capable of reproducing throughout their lifespan once they have reached maturity.
- Turtles do not compensate for an increase in the mortality rate by producing more eggs per year.
- Very small increases in the mortality rate, such as being killed on roads, can lead to the decline and eventual extinction of the population.

Source: Ontario Turtle Conservation Centre