

TURTLE TIME

The Ganaraska Region Conservation Authority (GRCA) reminds the public that June is peak turtle nesting season and to watch for turtles crossing roads. Concerns raised by citizens in Bewdley about annual losses of snapping turtles resulting from vehicle traffic have prompted the GRCA to notify watershed residents of this issue. “During nesting season numerous female turtles leave the marsh in Bewdley and cross the road looking for places to lay their eggs,” according to Ken Towle, GRCA Terrestrial Ecologist. Preferred nesting areas are gravel shoulders of the road and nearby driveways, as well as sandy soils in nearby yards.

Snapping turtles are designated as a “Special Concern” species by the Province through the Endangered Species Act, based largely on their sensitivity to increases in roads and traffic. It takes years for turtles to mature, and scientists are concerned that continuous removal of adult females from a population, often before they are able to lay their eggs, could result in rapid decline of the species. “We should also be concerned because snapping turtles play a valuable role as scavengers of dead and diseased fish,” states Towle. This helps maintain a clean lake and stronger fish populations. At least two other turtle species at risk, the northern map turtle and the Blanding’s turtle, are known from the Rice Lake area. Snapping turtles, and the common painted turtle, can be found in wetlands and ponds throughout Northumberland County.

Turtle nesting season normally begins in late May and peaks in June. This is when they are most likely to be seen crossing roads. Hatchlings emerge in the late summer and head back to lakes and wetlands. “At this stage they are only about the size of a toonie” say Towle. “They are highly vulnerable to predators, but are also so small that drivers are unlikely to see them.” Numerous Ontario municipalities have erected turtle crossing signs in an effort to raise awareness about the issue and reduce the number of fatalities. Several years ago GRCA worked with Township of Hamilton staff to have turtle crossing signs erected in Bewdley.

How to help a turtle cross the road:

1. Make sure it is safe before stopping and leaving your vehicle. Turn on emergency flashers. Stop well off on the shoulder.
2. Look both ways before stepping on to the road to avoid oncoming vehicles.
3. Gently lift the turtle and place it on the shoulder of the side of the road in the direction it was heading.
4. In the case of large snapping turtles, (to avoid bites) a shovel can be used to gently lift and carry the turtle, or the turtle can be coaxed onto a towel or blanket and lifted by two people.

For further information on this important project, please contact Ken Towle at ktowle@grca.on.ca or 905.885.8173.

