

NATURE NOTES

Over the past two or three weeks, a very common sight along the roads linking and bordering our two lakes has been slowly meandering turtles of all shapes and sizes. Our somewhat aberrant spring has led to a later than usual migration of these reptiles which normally starts in late May and peaks in June.



So why did the turtle cross the road? Well as the weather warms up turtles head off in search of new territory, breeding opportunities and of course, places to lay their eggs. Being cold-blooded, they also seek the hot asphalt surfaces of roads as places to warm up, which is why we often find turtles seemingly quite comatose in the middle of a busy road soaking up the rays! This means that turtles are constantly in danger of being crushed by passing cars. So what can we as local cottage owners do?

First of all, we ourselves can slow down so as to avoid suddenly coming upon a turtle in the middle of the road around a bend. There are no snappy phrases relating to turtles such as “Brake for Snakes”, so maybe we should come up with something? Perhaps “Please don’t hurtle, save a turtle”. Some of our roads actually have turtle crossing signs which serve as reminders to watch for these slow-moving or even slothfully inert hard-shelled creatures.

Secondly if you see a turtle making its way across the road **and it is safe to pull over**, put on your hazard lights and ensure the turtle makes its way safely to the other side. If you think the turtle is in danger of being struck by a car and it is safe for you to get out of the car you can speed up the process by grasping the turtle firmly on both sides of the body just in front of the hind legs and carrying it to the other side. Large snapping turtles, which have long necks and are prone to bite hard, should either be raised wheelbarrow-like behind their hind legs and helped across the road, or gently pushed to safety with a blunt object. The Nature Conservancy stresses that it is really important to keep turtles moving in the direction they are headed, as they have a destination in mind and will simply try to cross the road again if put back where they started from. Once you have seen the turtle safely across, leave it alone. Never relocate turtles to new areas as this might subject them to foreign diseases and parasites.

Next it is important to get help for injured turtles as they may suffer for months from non-fatal crushing injuries. So take the animal to a vet, animal shelter or wildlife rehabilitator where its condition can be assessed and, if necessary, the creature put out of its suffering. Even if you think the animal is dead stop and make sure by testing for a reaction. This can be done by touching the corner of an eyelid or pinching a back toe.

So why save turtles? Turtles are considered an important part of wetland ecosystems because they eat dead leaves, insects and debris. They are often referred to as “wetland janitors.” Kristyn Ferguson, a program director with the Nature Conservancy of Canada says: “Without turtles in that system we don’t actually know what would happen. It could be catastrophic if that key element of the wetland ecosystem was removed.” Turtles can take up to 25 years before reproducing and their egg survival rate is very low, so even one turtle being killed by a car can have a major impact. Many of the turtle species occurring in our area are considered at risk, so let’s do our bit in helping to preserve these denizens of our wetlands.

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