

A Primer on Turtles

Turtle Egg-laying

Turtles lay their eggs in summer from May until September. During this time the females must travel to a suitable nesting spot, which is a moist, south-facing slope with sandy soil or gravel and sparse vegetation. It is the need to travel to nesting locations which takes turtles across roads, and it is mostly females which make these trips. Many turtle nests are dug on the shoulders of roads.

Incubation times vary from 55 days to over 120 days, depending on species and air temperatures. Nests should be left undisturbed and protected from predators if possible during this time. A piece of *plywood* or wire mesh may be *placed* over a nest for a week to allow the turtle odour to dissipate. This reduces the chances that a predator will find the nest.

Helping a Turtle

If you wish to help a turtle cross a road, move it in the direction it is *traveling*. Small turtles can be picked up and carried by the shell (away from your body to avoid a spray which they can produce). Small Snapping Turtles can be carried by the base of the tail, again away from your body to stay clear of the jaws. A large Snapping Turtle (over 30 cm) should be moved with a shovel or dragged by the tail to avoid potential tail injury which might be caused by lifting.

To help an injured turtle, call a veterinarian, a Humane Society, or an animal rescue agency.

Turtle Basking

Turtles need to sit in the sun, or bask, to raise their body temperature and to help digest their food. Female turtles in particular need the extra heat to speed development of the eggs they are carrying. Basking sites which are safe from terrestrial predators, away from boat traffic, and protected from human disturbance are best. The turtle species most often seen basking is the Painted Turtle (*Chrysemys picta*), a small to medium turtle with a round, slightly domed shell.

The Rideau Roundtable has installed floating basking platforms and logs along the Rideau River in Kemptville, Merrickville, Smiths Falls and Ottawa to replace natural basking sites which have been lost as the shoreline has become more developed. The Roundtable hopes to protect turtle populations and, perhaps more importantly, to increase public awareness of turtles, their activities and habitats, and the river in general.

Turtle Viewing Locations

The basking locations chosen are visible to the public, yet safe from disturbance. They are:

- Kemptville - at Centennial Park in the middle of town
- at the Road 43 crossing of Kemptville Creek
- Merrickville - above the lock at the end of the spit
- below the lock in a quiet bay
- Smiths Falls - in the Swale at the Road 43 crossing.

Turtle Crossings & Signs

Some road locations are traditional turtle crossing spots. Each year turtles cross here, and many are killed by vehicles. The Roundtable is installing turtle crossing signs at known crossing spots to alert motorists and to help reduce roadkill. Turtles seen crossing roads may be the Painted Turtle, the Blanding's Turtle (*Emydoidea blandingii*), a medium to large turtle with a high domed shell and a bright yellow throat, or the Snapping Turtle (*Chelydra serpentina*), a large turtle with a *heavy serrated shell, a pointy head and a long tail*.

Monitoring & Reporting

Monitoring of turtles by volunteers is essential to identify road crossings where signs are needed, and to determine whether basking logs and platforms are in good locations and are being used. To report turtle sightings, please include the following information:

date

species of turtle

number of individuals

dead or alive (if a road crossing)

road name (if a road crossing)

location along the road or location of basking turtle Please provide road name and 911 pin number if available.

optional - UTM co-ordinates from topographic map or GPS.

Send reports by e-mail to the Eastern Ontario Biodiversity Museum (Kemptonville) at eobm-nat@mail2.storm.ca. This is the address of a nature list operated by the Museum. Anyone who is interested may join or leave this list at anytime.

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