

Turtles

By George Underhill

I write one article a year about turtles, and this is it. I have seen several pronouncements about wind turbines and their possible effect on the Blandings Turtle, which is categorized as "a species at risk." I've picked up one of these turtles from the road by Little Bluff, one off the road on County Road 17 on the way to town, and another at the Bird Banding Station. They're very pretty, with a rounded shell and bright yellow under parts. I sympathize with the concern about the Blandings Turtle but what about snappers? They're also categorized as a species at risk. The trouble is they are perceived as ugly and dangerous, thus less concern about them. Here's the thing, if you're ugly all kinds of uncomplimentary tales get spread and you're held in low regard, whether you be human or turtle. The Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) designates "Species at Risk" and while the snapper is one of those, the MNR allows trapping of two snappers a day with a possession limit of five. Apparently, people trap them for their flesh, and I have recipes for them. I'd rather root through the trash bin at McDonalds for food. Not only do they not appear to be the stuff of gourmands, 25% have toxin levels at which no meat is safe for human consumption and 75% are not safe for children or women of child-bearing age. Given this, why on earth allow them to be trapped for the purpose of dining? Talking to a guy who used to live by turtle trappers on East Lake, he tells me they would bait their traps with sunfish and leave them out overnight, and when they cleaned the snappers, the most repugnant odor of all time emanated from the eviscerated carcass. I don't doubt it. And you would eat them??

In fact seven of the eight species of turtles found in Ontario are in the species at risk category. It's simple. Mortality rates. It is very difficult for turtles to overcome an increase in mortality rates. These poor animals lay their eggs on warm ground, and to make it there, frequently cross roads where they are squashed by speeding cars. Once the eggs are laid, a variety of predators welcome them as a food source. Turtles don't reproduce until maturity, which varies from eight to twenty years. Only one-percent of the hatchlings will reach maturity,

because they must cross the same roads to reach water and are subject to predation as they scamper to the water. Only half of those are females. The math says 200 eggs and 18 years are needed to produce one egg-laying female, and it's the females that cross the highway. Long odds.

You can see turtles, a cold blooded animal, basking in the sun on logs, absorbing the heat into their bodies. I'm sure as they cross a grassy field and exit onto the warm pavement, they must think, "Oh man, that feels *soooo good!* Hot on top of my shell AND heat on the bottom. I'm staying here to luxuriate in the warmth." It feels great until a car crushes them.

If you see them on the road, stop and move them. Picking up a big snapper can be intimidating, because with their long necks they can reach back and inflict a nasty bite. Not only that, they ingest large amounts of water prior to their land excursion (in case the ground is hard where they're digging). I know from personal experience that this water will squirt on your legs and shoes as you pick them up. Tempt them with a sturdy stick, and when they snap it, drag them to a safe spot.

As I write this, it is the 7th of June, and I saw the first snapper on my road today. Not a big one, probably early in her egg-laying career. I saw her on my way to the mailbox, but she was gone when I returned. The thing is, snappers don't entirely fit into their shell, and when they want to move they can lift the shell off the ground and pretty much scamper on their little fat legs for short distances. You can see a snapper looking for egg laying spots a long way from the water. It's a long way back for the babies.

So...you can't do much, but do what you can.

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Milford, Ontario, K0K 2P0 Phone: 613 476 9199,