

Grassroots efforts making a big difference for turtles



By Nate Smelle

With the 2023 turtle nesting season now underway, Think Turtle Conservation Initiative's managing director Kelly Wallace is already on the move. When she first launched the initiative in 2016, Wallace said there were only about 300 turtles admitted to the Ontario Turtle Hospital that season. While on one hand the fact that last year the hospital took in a record 1,885 turtles shows the severity of the threat turtles are faced with each year, she also sees the increase as a sign of how much awareness is growing, and how much grassroots efforts truly help.

"I look at turtles as being a way into conservation efforts," explains Wallace. "Turtles are one of the few species, that because of their size and demeanour, we can actually assist them hands-on. It's not like you can go up to a porcupine and help it across the road, or a raccoon, or any other animal. In that regard with turtles, the fact that people feel they can be very instrumental in helping a species at risk – obviously they have to be safe on the roads – is something people feel really good about. It's not the greatest term, but it's like instant gratification, because they see a turtle in trouble, they park safely and get out to help the turtle across, then they drive away knowing that they did something good."

According to Wallace, the recovery rate for turtles admitted to the Ontario Turtle Hospital is around 60 per cent. When speaking with people who have helped a turtle across a road, or transported one to the hospital, Wallace said some individuals dismiss their efforts as being "no big deal." In reality, she said it is a big deal because that defining moment could be what gets that turtle through one nesting season and into the next.

"I can't stress enough how important and how valuable grassroots efforts are," says Wallace. "Turtles are an animal that people can actually be instrumental in helping. If they know how to move them across the road, and that they can stop if they know about the turtle hospital; and if they know that if a turtle nests on their property and how they can get a hold of a nest protector; just those things alone, may not seem that big, but if people are involved in those and understand how to do it, it helps considerably. It makes such a difference, it really does! The aim here is to help restore the turtle population and distribution and the government certainly isn't interested in that. That's why concerned citizens and stewardship are so important. They are huge! What these people are doing should never be dismissed as small, because it really is helping and making a difference."

Recognizing that this will be the first turtle nesting season for many new residents who moved to cottage country during the COVID-19 pandemic, Wallace said she is looking forward to engaging with them regarding turtle conservation. Acknowledging the momentum she and her team of volunteers at Think Turtle had been building prior to the pandemic, she is also eager to start holding public community outreach events again.

As summer draws near, more people begin looking for property to purchase in cottage country communities such as those in North Hastings. Wallace reminds anyone looking to purchase property, or that has purchased a property in a rural community, cottage country or the outskirts of urban centres to be aware of the fact that these type of properties oftentimes include land that may be a wildlife corridor, natural habitat, and/or nesting site for turtles. Before purchasing property in such areas, she says buyers need to find out if there is a history of turtle activity on the property from their realtor, the previous owner, former tenants, or neighbours. Renters also need to ask questions of their potential new landlord, and make sure they are aware of any nesting sites or turtle activity nearby their new place of residence, she says.

The friendlier weather during the spring and summer also brings with it an increase in the number of construction projects and people making upgrades to properties. Although North Hastings is known as cottage country, Wallace said it is important for new property owners or visitors to the area to remember that it is also "turtle country." She says this means "turtles can end up anywhere at any time." For this reason, she says it is critical for residents to be aware of turtle and wildlife activity on their property, if they are to become responsible stewards of the land where they live.

"Some people might have acquired property since last year, and they aren't even going to know if they have turtles that show up on their property," says Wallace. "Also, if anybody is excavating on their property and they unearth a turtle nest, then that's another situation to call the turtle hospital about. That's one of the big things right now when it comes to contractors, homeowners, property owners when they are doing upgrades and shoreline [development] as well, because turtles are so determined. They're homebodies and creatures of habit, and they will go back to where they have nested. Most often it is where they were born, so it's like this instinct that's hard-wired into them. The problem is when someone has changed their property or built on it and taken that area away the turtle is still going to show up there."

Turtle nesting season in Ontario's cottage country starts in mid-May and peaks in the month of July, Wallace says. With the Ford government rendering environmental protections in Ontario useless through their decision to open up Provincially Significant Wetlands and other ecologically sensitive ecosystems in the Greenbelt for development, she says now is the time for the public to step up and get involved with protecting the environment.

"The government has abandoned wildlife and the environment," says Wallace. "They've just abandoned it, so it's up to us. That's why I'm saying grassroots is where it's at. As concerned citizens we need to do what we can do. And we can actually do a fair bit. One person on their property doing something may not think it's a big deal, but then when you think about all the people in the community that are doing it; and then you add the next community, and the next one, all the way across Ontario, there is a lot of people looking after private property through whatever conservation effort's they are involved with. So collectively that's doing a lot."

To report an injured turtle or learn more about the Ontario Turtle Conservation Centre contact: 705-741-5000. To purchase/borrow a turtle nest protector, and/or find out more about Think Turtle Conservation Initiative and their numerous conservation efforts, visit their Facebook page; or, contact Wallace by email at: thinkturtle@yahoo.com; or, by phone at: 647-606-9537.