

Turtle festival stirs interest and concern



Paddy the snapping turtle, and turtle ambassador from the Ontario Turtle Conservation Centre, makes his grand entrance to the Bancroft Turtle Festival held on May 5 at the Bancroft Fish and Game Club. / JIM EADIE Special to This Week

By Jim Eadie

Over the course of the day this past Saturday, May 5, more than 100 people attended the first Bancroft Turtle Festival organized by local Think Turtle Conservation Initiative. The festival featured displays, three feature presentations and real turtles.

Ontario Nature, The Land Between and Turtle Guardians took up the morning with presentations covering citizen science, the Ontario Reptile and Amphibian Atlas, the work of the Turtle Guardians, upcoming turtle walks to raise awareness of the plight of turtles and their needs for funding.

Brandon Pettipas, 15, from Cardiff, was very enthusiastic.

"I started [being] interested in insects from Grades 2 to 4," he said. "I had an insect field guide and me and my little brothers, Tristin and Justin, would go for hikes and look for insects. Then my school teacher, Karen Phipps, inspired me with turtles."

"Their great-grandfather always was a big nature man," said the boy's mother. "Our family was always interested in nature. And the boys would work together and go off on expeditions together. It was just the way of our family."

"I have a camera and I take pictures of what I see," said Brandon. He now has a reptiles and amphibians field guide too.

Ontario Turtle Conservation Centre education co-ordinator Wendy Baggs described the eight species of turtles found in Ontario, their ways of behaving, eating and surviving. Seven of eight species of Ontario turtles are considered at risk and the painted turtle will likely be listed shortly as well.

The centre is best known as the only turtle trauma treatment centre in Ontario. That was the original intention.

"We have almost 600 turtles brought to our centre this year already. Most of them have been hit by a car and are females that haven't laid their eggs yet," she said.

Dead turtles brought to the centre can have their eggs harvested, so the centre started a hatchling program to incubate and hatch eggs.

"That became our new hatchling program," she said. "Rehabilitated turtles and hatchlings must be released within one kilometre of where they came from, so it is important we know that information. Last year we gathered 3,600 eggs from 960 injured turtles. They were released in the fall, except for 600 which we kept over the winter and released in the spring."

The centre is keenly aware of the importance of public education. That became the third program under their mandate.

Lastly, the centre has undertaken fieldwork to determine how successful the program either is or is not. Observing past client turtles back in the wild, and turtles at-large sometimes using small transmitters, can provide very useful scientific information to inform their work.

Real live turtles brought from the centre added great interest to the presentation.

"These are non-releasable turtles? They become species advocates," said Baggs. "A turtle may be un-releasable for a number of

reasons? due to the injuries? for example this Blanding's turtle is blind in one eye and has head injuries and would not survive in the wild now. Also, if the turtle has never lived in the wild, such as one kept as a pet. We have a special licence to keep these turtles for educational work and they live at the centre.?

?It doesn't matter how big or small, turtles are the heartbeat of our wetlands,? she said. ?And remember ? what you find in the woods, leave in the woods.?

Like young Brandon. Just take a picture.

The next local event coming up is the Turtle Walk on May 26. It starts at 10 a.m. at Riverside Park.

For further information on the walk go to www.turtlewalk.ca, about the Ontario Turtle Conservation Centre and the hospital go to www.OntarioTurtle.ca or call 705-741-5000 and/or on Think Turtle Conservation Initiative go to www.facebook.com/thinkturtledi.