

Turtle hatchlings on the move in North Hastings



By Nate Smelle

According to Kelly Wallace of the Think Turtle Conservation Initiative, so far in 2021 there have been more than 1,140 injured turtles admitted to the Ontario Turtle Conservation Centre's turtle hospital. Among these turtles, she said 90 per cent of their injuries were the result of being struck by a motor vehicle.

Knowing that many turtle hatchlings will soon be emerging from their nests and crossing roads throughout North Hastings, Wallace said it is disturbing to think about how such a large number of mature turtles that are more visible to motorists have been struck. It is especially unnerving, she said, recognizing that the survival rate for turtle nests and hatchlings in the wild is less than one per cent. Faced with such "abysmal odds," Wallace said the arrival of any turtle hatchling is extraordinary.

Providing insight into the annual arrival of these miracles of nature, she said, "With the nest having escaped predation when so many did not; and, the turtle embryos developed despite environmental challenges dished out; and, any number of human activity impacts a nest could be exposed to, one would think these little turtles had paid their dues. Fact is, having survived to this point, turtle hatchlings just exiting the nest face challenges that could easily contribute to their demise as they set out to get to their intended body of water. What may seem a short distance to us for a hatchling often includes crossing a road and a journey that puts them at risk of being picked off by predators from the sky and on land. Add to that challenging terrain due to environmental aspects, infrastructure and human impact."

Recognizing that turtle hatchlings face a barrage of challenges as soon as they breathe their first breath above ground, Wallace asks all drivers to remain vigilant and stay alert for turtle hatchlings crossing the road. She said this means drivers must: stay off their phones; drive the speed limit; remain focused on the road; and, encourage passengers to be on the lookout.

"The turtle population cannot continue to sustain losses each year," Wallace said. "Every turtle hatchling saved is a possibility of a turtle that will go on to live a long life and contribute to future generations of turtles."

Highlighting the importance of Think Turtle's awareness raising campaign, Wallace said it is vital to spread the word in order to prevent Ontario's turtles from going over the edge of extinction. At this time of year, she said it is even more essential to remind motorists, new residents, and visitors to the area that as turtle hatchlings emerge, there will be more turtle activity on the roads.

As part of this year's campaign, Wallace said they have: installed turtle hatchling crossing signs; put up posters in the community; embarked on an online awareness raising campaign; and, launched a radio awareness campaign. Thanks to the new municipal

partnerships formed between Think Turtle Conservation Initiative and several municipalities throughout North Hastings, she said they have been able to expand this year's campaign to protect turtles. Local municipalities currently working with Think Turtle to enhance environmental protection include: the Town of Bancroft; Faraday Township; Municipality of Hastings Highlands; Tudor and Cashel Township; Limerick Township; City of Belleville; Peterborough County; and, Prince Edward County.

"It is through these collaborative partnerships that more and more people are coming to understand the importance of protecting wildlife's role in maintaining healthy ecosystems that provide invaluable ecological services we depend on and benefit from," said Wallace. "We are so thankful for this support, it resonates in a way that illustrates a community that understands it is rooted in nature and this is a connection that is important to protect."

To keep up with the Think Turtle Conservation Initiative's latest conservation efforts, visit their blog at:

<https://thinkturtleconservationinitiative.wordpress.com/2021/08/21/watch-4-hatchlings/>.

Wallace said anyone who encounters an injured turtle can call the Ontario Turtle Conservation Centre's turtle hospital at: 705-741-5000. As the province's only wildlife rehabilitation centre dedicated to providing medical and rehabilitative care to Ontario's turtle species, she said the OTCC provides turtles recover from their injuries. Wallace said the centre also has a team of turtle taxi volunteers to assist with the transportation of injured turtles from anywhere in Ontario. Once treated and rehabilitated, she said the turtles are released back into their natural habitat at the point of origin.