

Save the turtles efforts underway on Skakum Road

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Staff Writer

DOMVILLE - Their mission is to protect turtles from untimely death on local roads.

South Nation Conservation and Grenville Land Stewardship Council have banded together to help preserve at-risk turtle species - and they are asking for your help in protecting the shelled creatures.

At Chippenhook Creek on Skakum Road, north of Domville in Grenville County, the two organizations have set up a turtle fence, erected turtle caution signs on the road and installed other features to save turtles from early death.

South Nation species-at-risk technician Michelle Scheerder said vehicles are the greatest threat to turtles. Small animals such as raccoons and skunks are also dangerous because they often dig up and eat the turtle eggs from the roadside gravel.

Jack Henry, the stewardship council co-ordinator, said the Skakum Road area is "a hotspot" for turtles. "We've been monitoring here. Turtles are laying eggs on the sides of the road."

Scheerder said the reptiles usually lay eggs in mid-June to early July, although due to the

early spring, it may be sooner this year.

The new fence is designed to corral the turtles in an area off the road.

"Vehicles kill them on the road. It's a big, big problem for turtles," said Scheerder. "If you're killing the female adults, it's a major cause of turtle decline across Canada."

She said several species local to the region are at risk.

One is the Blanding's turtle, a medium-sized turtle with a distinctive yellow chin and throat with a grayish-brown shell domed like a helmet. Scheerder said Blanding's turtles travel long distances - sometimes several kilometres - putting them at greater risk of being squashed by vehicles.

Another at-risk species is the snapping turtle, which is large (up to 18 inches) with a brown or black shell and large head.

However, she pointed out that the other turtle common to the region, the painted turtle which has an orange-red pattern on the side of its shell, is not at risk.

"Brake for turtles. You'll see a lot of movement over the next month," said Henry.

In addition to installing the fence and turtle signs, South Nation and Grenville Land Stewardship, with help from



volunteers, have built four turtle basking rafts to give the reptiles a safe place to sun themselves and a gravel bed where they can lay their eggs.

The project was completed with a \$3,000 provincial grant, Henry said. He hopes local volunteers will help apply for more funding to create more rafts and another gravel bed on the north side of Skakum Road. Local Rangers and other volunteers have already been helping.

Scheerder said mesh will be placed over the gravel bed to protect the eggs from predators, and holes will be large enough that the turtle hatchlings will be able to get out. Hatchlings are "about the size of a toonie," she explained.

"Last year was so cold that we didn't see a lot hatch," said Henry.

The shells usually remain buried - "if you see eggshells, something dug it up," said Scheerder.

Both are optimistic the new system will help save turtles.

"Nothing like this has been done in this area before," Scheerder said.

Both organizations also hope the public will help by reporting



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Michelle Scheerder of South Nation Conservation shows turtles that are at risk and found in this region. She urges people who spot these to e-mail or call her at 613-984-2948 ext. 310 or e-mail her at info@nation.on.ca. Signs like the one at left have been installed on Skakum Road to warn drivers to be on the lookout.

sightings of at-risk turtles such as snapping turtles or the Blanding's variety.

"People want to save turtles," said the South Nation technician. "People like turtles because they're cute and they have a hard go of it."

A strong turtle population is an indicator of a healthy, vibrant ecosystem, added Henry. "One of the things people can do is shoo them off the road.... But snapping turtles snap when they feel threatened because they can't hide completely in their shell."

Scheerder suggests using a stick, which the turtle will grab onto, to ferry it to the other side of the road.

Henry asks that people not steal the turtle caution signs.

The new signs have anti-theft bolts and nuts welded into place to prevent thieves from taking them for display in their homes.

Anyone who sees a Blanding's or snapping turtle, or one of the rare varieties such as the northern map turtle, spotted turtle, spiny softshell or eastern musk (stinkpot) turtle, is asked to report it at the Eastern Ontario Model Forest website's reptile and amphibian atlas: www.eomf.on.ca.

You can also call Jack Henry at 613-342-8528 or Michelle Scheerder at 613-984-2948 ext. 310 or send her an e-mail, with pictures of the turtle you saw, to info@nation.on.ca.

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