

Turtle Shells No Match for Tires - Give Turtles a Brake!

By Mike Marchand, NH Fish and Game

Spring is a welcome time in New Hampshire, and one of the signs of the season is turtles migrating to nesting habitat. We can help them survive by slowing down and keeping an eye out for turtles crossing the roads in coming weeks, says New Hampshire Fish and Game Department Wildlife Biologist Mike Marchand.

“Turtle nesting season provides us with a unique opportunity to see turtles moving on land, but it is an extremely vulnerable time for the turtles,” says Marchand. “Today, the biggest threat to turtle populations in New Hampshire is being struck by automobiles on roadways. While male turtles may choose to travel overland to reach a different wetland habitat during spring and fall, mature female turtles MUST leave the relative safety of ponds and wetlands to contribute to the development of future generations.” Read more to find out what you can do to help turtles survive



Turtle nesting season in New Hampshire typically lasts from late May into early July, reaching maximum intensity in early to mid-June.

To find an appropriate nesting habitat, female turtles may easily travel several hundred yards or more, seeking a sandy or other well-drained area that is open to sunlight. Female turtles dig a nest chamber, deposit eggs, cover the eggs with soil, and depart, leaving the turtle embryos and future young turtles to fend for themselves. Young turtles must cope with predators, primarily raccoons, which may dig up and destroy a large number of eggs. When turtles are small, everything eats them -- raccoons, great blue herons, even a bullfrog on occasion. As turtles approach adulthood, they are less vulnerable to predators. Predators are generally not catastrophic for local populations, says Marchand, but the impact of development and the associated increase in amount and speed of traffic on our roads is taking a toll.

Turtles have coped with various threats by being able to live a very long time, with some local species of turtles possibly exceeding 70 years! But low survival of young isn't the only reason why turtles must live a long time -- female turtles of some species may not be capable of reproducing until they are 15 years of age or older.

Here are a few things you can do to help New Hampshire turtles survive:

- 1) Slow down and watch for turtles in roadways!
- 2) Help turtles cross roads safely. If you see a turtle crossing a road, and it is safe for you to do so, help it cross in the direction it was traveling. Never create a dangerous situation for other motorists or yourself. Snapping turtles should be handled with care or allowed to cross on their own.
- 3) Don't take the turtle home or move it far from where you found it. A turtle taken to your home is a turtle lost from the local population. (Also, all New Hampshire native turtles are protected by state law during nesting season).

4) If a turtle is injured, visit http://www.wildnh.com/Wildlife/wildlife_rehabbers.htm or call Fish and Game's Wildlife Division at (603) 271-2461 for a list of wildlife rehabilitators in your area. For more on what to do if you find an injured turtle, visit http://www.wildnh.com/Wildlife/Nongame/injured_turtle.htm.

5) Report turtle sightings to N.H. Fish and Game's Reptile and Amphibian Reporting Program (http://www.wildnh.com/Wildlife/Nongame/reptiles_amphibians.htm).

6) Work with land trusts and town officials to help conserve important natural areas in your community.

7) Mulch and soil piles can be attractive places for turtles to nest when located near wetland areas. Spreading mulch into gardens soon after delivery will reduce turtles from nesting in a mulch pile that is likely to be disturbed later in the season. If mulch will be in place for several weeks or more, covering with plastic will help reduce attractiveness for nesting turtles.

8) Since adult nesting turtles don't offer their eggs and young any parental care, the adults' visit to nesting areas is usually brief. Egg laying is often completed in several hours at which point adults will head back to water.

9) Turtles require well-drained soils with minimal canopy coverage. If suitable turtle nesting habitat is limited locally, additional nesting habitat could be enhanced or created with habitat management but a biologist should be consulted prior to initiating management activities (*turtles can be harmed if work is conducted at the wrong time of year in active nesting areas; painted turtles can overwinter in nest chambers so eggs/hatchlings could occur in suitable nesting habitat from late May to April*).

By taking these steps, we can all help to ensure that New Hampshire's turtles stay abundant and healthy. So slow down and give turtles a brake this spring and summer!

See pictures of and learn how to identify New Hampshire's seven native species of turtles at <http://www.wildnh.com/Wildlife/Nongame/turtles.htm>.