

Chautauqua Watershed Notes
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Turtles of the Chautauqua Watershed
By Priscilla Titus



Figure 1 This painted turtle photographed while basking in the sun last summer should now be hibernating in a thick blanket of mud at the bottom of the lake.

Any time I'm walking around in winter and feel chilled, I can't help but wonder how our native fauna are managing to make it until spring. Lately my mind has been on turtles and that led me to do a little research on the turtles that inhabit the Chautauqua Lake Watershed. Did you know that of the 20 native species of turtles that occur in New York State, the New York Amphibian and Reptile Atlas Project identified seven species that occur right here in our watershed? These are the Blanding's, common musk, eastern box, painted, snapping, spiny softshell, and wood turtle. Although some of these species are common throughout the state, the Blanding's turtle is a state-listed threatened species, and the eastern box turtle, spiny softshell, and wood turtle are state-listed species of special concern due to risks of endangerment to these species in New York State.

This time of year, all of these cold-blooded animals are hibernating, although hibernation habits and sites differ between species. Eastern box turtles are chiefly terrestrial and they excavate hibernation burrows in deep leaf litter and soil mixed with decaying logs or less frequently in deep mud found in forested wetlands. Blanding's turtles are considered semi-aquatic, spending time in shallow marshes and along shorelines as well as in deeper water and hibernating in mud at the bottom of deep marshes. Wood turtles tend to hibernate in water that never completely freezes such as flowing creeks and streams, and have been known to hibernate in groups. Painted, snapping, spiny softshell, and common musk turtles are all considered fully aquatic and burrow in deep mud at the bottom of the waterbodies they inhabit. Survival during this period of inactivity will depend on whether or not their summer diet was adequate enough to sustain them through the winter.

Mating takes place in spring soon after emergence from hibernation. In May or June, females will begin to seek appropriate nest sites where they will dig a hole to lay their clutch of eggs, after which they will return to their primary habitat, leaving the nest untended. This is the time of year when you may frequently see a turtle crossing the road while seeking a sunny area with sparse vegetation and sandy or loosely packed soils that can be easily excavated. Unfortunately, the untended nests are often preyed upon by raccoons, skunks, and other predators. Surviving hatchlings usually emerge in 2-3 months and young turtles are also vulnerable as they travel from the nest site to their primary habitats. Sexual maturity is slow to come for these long-lived animals and can take up to two decades for some species, so

you can see why many individuals do not live long enough to reproduce. That, coupled with the complexities of their habitat needs illustrates why the integrity of the entire watershed is necessary for the viability of our natural turtle diversity.

If you spot a turtle during an outing this spring or summer, please try not to disturb them and remember that you should not try to touch or capture them. If you believe you should assist a turtle that is crossing the road because it is in danger, be sure to move it the minimum distance possible and set it down so that it can continue in the direction it was heading when you found it. Wild turtles are not appropriate pets, and once they have been kept in captivity they should never be re-released to the wild because of the risk of introducing disease to healthy wild populations. Non-native turtles reared in the pet trade can also negatively impact native turtle populations both through spread of disease and through competition for resources and, thus, should never be released into the wild. The best reward comes from admiring these wonderful creatures in their natural ecosystem, and you can help them best by protecting the resources they depend upon for survival and the perpetuation of their species.

The Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy is a local, private not-for-profit organization supported primarily by membership donations and grants from private foundations. Its mission is to preserve and enhance the water quality, scenic beauty and ecological health of the lakes, streams and watersheds of the Chautauqua region. It is the only locally-based not-for-profit organization actively conserving important habitats, scenic sites and watershed lands in the county. It takes a preventive approach to address lake algae and plant problems. For a list of upcoming events go to <http://www.chautauquawatershed.org/> or call 716-664-2166.