

Meet the baby turtle protectors of the Rideau River

SARAH ST-PIERRE

At golden hour, on a Friday evening in late September, cyclists in Brantwood Park slowed down as they noticed people crowding the riverside. A little boy in a neon green helmet held onto his mother's leg as he squinted at the water, hoping to spot a just-hatched baby snapping turtle.

Greg Macdougall stood at the edge of the beach that evening, pointing out the hatchling to anyone interested. One of the onlookers recognized him: "It's the turtle whisperer!" he exclaimed.

Macdougall, a community organizer, is at the core of a small group monitoring turtle activity in Old Ottawa South and Old Ottawa East. Turtles of Old Ottawa East and South endeavours to protect the at-risk turtle population along the Rideau River by placing protector frames on top of turtle nests and monitoring their activity. Their efforts come to a head in September and October during hatching season.

"The reason why we protect [nests] is, mainly it's raccoons, but predators come and dig them up, mainly either when they first get laid, or when they're about to hatch," Macdougall explained.

In urban areas, higher populations

of raccoons and household pets pose a greater threat to turtle nests than in the wild.

In Ontario, all eight species of turtles native to Canada are at risk. While nest predation is not as threatening as habitat loss or road mortality, it remains significant.

"If you don't have a future population, you don't have a species either," said David Seburn, freshwater turtle specialist at the Canadian Wildlife Federation. According to him, 70 to 80 per cent of nests get predated, on average.

Macdougall knew people in the area helped baby turtles get to the water, but he said he didn't think there was much nest protection happening before his group formed over the last three years. The most active members typically gather materials to build the protection frames they put down over nests in June, when the turtles lay their eggs. "These people are doing amazing, amazing work," said Seburn, who is in touch with them.

A spokesperson for the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry confirmed that people are allowed to place nest protectors on public land, provided they have received a Consent



SUPPLIED PHOTO

Turtle protectors build the protection frames that they place over the nests in June, when the turtles lay their eggs.

to Deposit letter from the government after contacting their local ministry office.

Maintaining turtle populations at healthy levels can have real benefits for their ecosystems.

Some species of turtles, like snapping turtles, are important scavengers. "They're basically the garbage collectors of a lot of wetlands; they feed on dead fish and dead birds," said Grégory Bulté, who teaches biology at Carleton University.

Turtles can live for decades and mobilize nutrients that affect the cycle of nitrogen, phosphorus and carbon in the ecosystem, he added.

For nest protection to have a tangible effect on turtle populations, Bulté stressed a high proportion of nests would likely have to be protected. He added he was skeptical about the efficacy of the practice, citing a lack of studies on the matter.

"But I would say that probably one of the big impacts it has is raising awareness," he said.

Seburn said he has seen the benefits of this heightened awareness in neighbourhoods along the Rideau River.

"People get reconnected to the river in their backyards, and they discover the incredible life that's going on there," he said.

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Bess Fraser combines her love of illustration and nature by sketching both baby birds and baby turtles in a fictional forest setting where the animals connect with each other. She is inspired by Jane Goodall's passion for her love of animals, reading and the environment.

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