



Branching Out

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The Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, working under the Endangered Species Act, 2007, has declared the natural habitat in our area to be protected. As of July 1, 2012, it is **illegal** to remove natural habitat without the authorization of the Ministry. While this legislation encourages landowners to preserve natural habitat, the Ministry does not forbid all human activity, but rather encourages landowners to consult with the Ministry before undertaking projects that have the potential to cause harm to the environment. Call 519-773-9241 for guidance from the Ministry.



Presenting: The Common Snapping Turtle (Species of Special Concern)

- cold blooded, the most prehistoric-looking turtle species
- inhabits the Old Ausable Channel in Huron Woods
- lives up to 100 years of age in the wild

- emerges during the day to bask in the sun
- black, tan, or olive carapace, often covered in algae, small undershell
- long tail with dinosaur like triangular spikes
- carapace is too small for turtle to withdraw into for protection, snapping is its only defence when threatened on land
- female does not breed until approximately 17-19 years old
- lays up to 50 round eggs, first digging a nest in late May or June in an open area, usually with loose sandy soil, often by the side of a road
- gender of the offspring depends on the temperature during incubation
- hatchlings, 2-3 cm in length emerge from shells in the fall
- can live in almost any freshwater habitat, most often in slow moving water with a soft mud or sandy bottom, and abundant vegetation
- lives in surprisingly small wetlands, walking on the river and lake bottoms, close to shore
- hibernates in winter in the silt at bottom of rivers and lakes
- feeds on aquatic plants and invertebrates, fish, frogs, snakes, small turtles, aquatic birds and fresh carrion
- 90% of its diet is dead plants and animals, so Snapping Turtles play an important role in keeping waterbodies clean

Threats

- **loss of wetland habitat**
- slow moving out of the water, so **speeding cars present threat**
- destruction of even one adult female reduces the numbers greatly as these are generally the reproducing females crossing the road
- increased egg predation by raccoons, foxes, skunks and opossums
- hunting, poaching and sale in the pet trade contributes to decline
- few natural enemies, but hibernating and young turtles are prey to otters and mink
- Ontario government still allows hunting (legal limit is 2 per day) even though snapping turtles, over their long life span, accumulate toxins which make them unsafe for human consumption
- **Phragmites** infestation which prevents turtles from moving to and from water sources and nesting areas and alters the water levels interfering with consistent water temperatures essential for incubation of eggs

What Snapping Turtles Need to Survive

- drivers to **slow down** and watch for turtles migrating to and from nesting locations
- protection of natural habitat and prevention of the spread of phragmites
- pollution free rivers and lakes
- humans to refrain from activities that encourage raccoon and skunk attraction, hunting and collection of baby turtles for the pet trade

Remember that leaf fall is part of the natural habitat for hibernating endangered species because it creates a layer of insulation during heavy winter weather, and provides fertilizer for our native species of trees, understory plants and ground cover plants.

In addition, leave some fallen logs to provide nesting areas for the Five-lined Skinks when spring arrives.