

Appalachian Corridor conducting turtle study

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Jennifer Vallière and Maude Sirois are in their final year of a career course in bio-ecology and are undergoing a three-month study on turtles in the north Missisquoi River between Mansonville and Eastman. Here they are at Peasely Pond on Route 245.

When it comes to turtle talk, Town of Brome Lake resident Alan Gauthier is becoming dubbed as the "turtle whisperer" and though on the surface there is something almost comical about his efforts twice-over to save the snapping reptile, he is not alone in what has become an important crusade by bio-ecologists and those who strive to maintain a balance in the ecosystem.

Last summer Gauthier shared his exaltation in saving "Eleven," the eleventh turtle in a clutch that had been laid close to the business that he and his wife own on Lakeside Road in Knowlton. He said he just had to try to save her since all her other siblings had survived the challenge of cracking through the shells. "There she was, lifeless, weak from the struggle. The first responder in me jumped into action. I picked her up and blew air into her mouth and massaged her to resuscitate her. When her little toes started moving, I got so excited that I took her back to the gym and washed her. She got stronger and stronger, and I eventually took her to the river and gave her back to her natural habitat."

It meant a lot to Gauthier. He was truly humbled by the experience and recounted the fragility of all living creatures. He

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is convinced that the same turtle that laid the clutch of eggs that "Eleven" hatched from is back this year. The mama snapper even allowed him to video her while she was laying her eggs. Her markings are the same and he can identify her by a specific chip in her shell. He has gone to the length of building a cage over the nest so that pedestrians don't crush them and other animals don't rob the eggs before they hatch and so that, once they have entered this world, driver's pay attention to not run over them if they are crossing the road. And he has let the town administration know as well as the Knowlton.com network of friends. Gauthier's story has caused a buzz and now others are reporting other locations where turtles are making their nests.

Gauthier knows that the turtle population is diminishing and wants to see that they survive. And he knows their value within the hierarchy. The perils of survival of these ancient, prehistoric looking creatures are increasing with the fight to

share space in an environment that once was theirs and is no longer. Urban sprawl leaves wildlife having to share their natural environment with humans and other wild animals, and more vehicles cross their paths that take them from nests to food source. He is not alone. Here in the Townships, Granby Zoo and Appalachian Corridor are making every effort to protect and sustain several species that are deemed "vulnerable" if not "endangered."

Last week, a group of elementary school children released 22 baby Eastern spiny softshell turtles into Pike River in collaboration with biologists at Granby Zoo in an effort to revitalize the threatened and diminishing population. While Quebec is known to be the home of eight types of turtles, Pike River is known to be the only area where these specific ones live. Yet over the past 15 years biologists have seen a dramatic decline in the population. That is why the zoo is trying to protect the nests from predators. In the past five years the zoo has been

successful in reintroducing more than 600 Eastern spiny softshells because the Lake Champlain watershed offers the specific magical habitat that sustains this type of turtle.

For the past two months Jennifer Vallière and Maude Sirois, both students in bio-ecology at a Sherbrooke CEGEP, have been conducting their required stage under the supervision of Appalachian Corridor's (AC) executive director, Mélanie Lalièvre and reptile specialist, Clément Robidoux who is AC's biologist and conservation coordinator specialized in reptiles. With one month to go, these ladies have been undergoing an in-depth study on the turtles along the Missisquoi River north between Mansonville and Eastman. The river runs parallel to Route 245 between Eastman and South Bolton and then between South Bolton and Mansonville on the 243. Vallière and Sirois can be seen anywhere along the way, bearing knapsacks, fluorescent vests, binoculars, cameras, clipboards and GPS to record location of nests and sightings of turtles, and any other significant

signs of turtle activity or disruptions.

The Missisquoi River banks are home to three known species and along the way there are three key road crossings where many are killed by vehicles.

Most common are the smallest of the three, the painted turtle. Often seen basking in the sun on logs in and around ponds and riverbanks, they are distinctly marked by a dark green to black top shell called the carapace and its stomach, known as the plastron, can be yellow, red, or orange with dark spotty markings. Scientists have found fossils of this species dating back 15 million years.

Gauthier's snapping turtle is known for its belligerent behaviour especially when it is out of water. Its snout looks more like a beak. It is one of the heaviest of the freshwater turtles in this region, weighing up to 35 pounds (almost 16 kilograms). Though they choose ponds and slow moving water as their homes, they will travel over land to reach the "right" habitat to lay their eggs.

Lalièvre explained that the Missisquoi River north is the home of the precious but endangered wood turtle. Designated as "vulnerable" by the Quebec Ministry of Wildlife, it is also listed as a threatened species in Canada. It can be identified by its orange legs and neck while its carapace is uniquely sculpted. Similar to counting rings on a tree, one can estimate the age of a wood turtle by the number of lines on its carapace. That roadkill is becoming an increased threat to the safety of these animals, Lalièvre says that AC, Quebec's ministries of wildlife, and transport are working to find a solution to this dilemma. In the past the Minister of Transport installed Turtle Crossing signs but "it appears that they are collector's items for some people who opt to remove them."

Having lived here on Earth for more than 200 million years, turtles came before birds, crocodiles, snakes, and lizards.

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