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LIFE

Citizen conservation effort seeks to protect turtles in High Park

Indigenous-led group Turtle Protectors safeguards High Park's reptiles and gives back to the Earth.

By **Elaine Smith** Special to the Star

Tue., July 19, 2022 | ⌚ 5 min. read

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

As a child, Carolynne Crawley regularly aided lost, injured and orphaned animals. So when she was out for an early morning walk in High Park last June and saw a “big mama snapping turtle just walking around,” her instinct was to protect the creature.

Crawley, a social entrepreneur, is the cofounder of Turtle Protectors, a newly formed, Indigenous-led, volunteer conservation program that guards turtles' nests in High Park and helps sick and injured animals.

On that day in June, Crawley didn't know it was nesting season, but she knew it was important to keep people away from the turtle.

“I ended up staying there for several hours, watching her dig a hole and bury her eggs.”

Crawley, who is part Mi' Kmaq of the Turtle Clan, reached out for advice. One of her calls was to Jenny Davis, a nature program designer and fellow High Park area resident.



“Carolynne called and asked me to bring something to protect the turtles,” said Davis, the other co-founder of Turtle Protectors.

Davis rummaged around and found a set of wire croquet wickets, which the women used to create a barrier around the mother turtle. Then they stood guard to ensure she was able to lay her eggs and get safely back to Grenadier Pond. They also contacted the park supervisor to arrange to place a protector over the nest.

“We were able to cut through all the red tape in five hours and Helen Sousa, the park supervisor, even gave staff permission to make us a half-dozen nest protectors,” said Davis. “She also met with us at the end of the season to talk about what turtle protection efforts would look like this year.”

When Crawley and Davis discovered that Toronto had no formal turtle protection program, they were determined to give these reptiles a fair chance to survive in High Park. After all, besides being a food source for mammals, turtles are valuable wetlands custodians who eat mosquito larvae and decaying carrion and vegetation to help keep the water clean. Thus, Turtle Protectors was born.

Crawley and Davis did research into turtles, their life cycles and their habitats. They discovered that there are eight at-risk species of turtles who make Ontario home: two of them, painted turtles and snapping turtles, are common in High Park; two others, Blanding’s turtles and northern map turtles, have also been seen there. There are also red-eared sliders in the park, a species that isn’t native to Ontario but is often purchased as a pet and later released into the wild.

Turtles love wetlands, such as High Park’s Grenadier Pond, but mother turtles come ashore to lay their eggs in a sunny spot where the soil will warm up enough to incubate them. In Ontario, they generally nest from May through August. The mother turtle identifies a good location for her nest, digs a hole, lays a clutch of eggs and returns to the wetlands from where she came.

Unfortunately, turtle eggs are a favourite protein snack for numerous predators, such as raccoons, skunks, coyotes and foxes, while off-leash dogs often enjoy digging up the nests. It’s all part of the natural cycle, said biologist Marc Dupuis-Desormeaux, a professor at York University and an expert in predation, so a number of deaths are inevitable. However, in Toronto, he said, “We have a lot of subsidized predators: animals that are at a much greater density than they would be in the wild.”

Fast forward to 2022. The Turtle Protectors kicked off their formal program on May 1 with a Turtle Clan feast, followed on May 30 by a public event that highlighted the importance of stewardship of the land and its creatures from an Indigenous perspective.



turtleprotectorshighpark • Follow ...
Grenadier Pond, High Park



turtleprotectorshighpark We spotted this turtle yesterday with the Adult Rangers of @highparknaturecentre at the northside of the #Grenadierpond.

Do you know what kind of turtle it is? Help us identify it!

Photo: @amyris1

@ontarioturtlecc @turtleconservancy
@turtleguardians
@heartlaketurtletroopers
@inaturalistorg
#turtlewatching #turtlelove
#turtlelover
#turtlephotography #protectturtles
#protectourspecies #freshwaterturtle



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It was important to the women that the group be Indigenous-led. Two Turtle Clan elders are among the advisers, getting involved in naming the group, approving the signage, and determining priorities and approaches.

“I see it as part of reconciliation work,” said Crawley. “The Earth continues to be harmed by systems of colonization and capitalism, but we believe in respect for the land and all beings.”

A spokesperson for Toronto Animal Services said by email that the program is guided by Msit No’kmaq, the Indigenous Land Stewardship Circle, Taiaiaako:n Historic Preservation Society and Indigenous elders, and supported by the High Park Nature Centre, TD Park People and various city divisions, including Toronto Animal Services, the parks, forestry and recreation department and the Indigenous Affairs Office.

Anyone walking through the park this month will see a series of “Turtle Crossing” signs that have also been translated into the Seneca, Wendat and Anishinaabemowin languages.

Turtle Protectors has placed nest protectors throughout the park: low-to-the-ground frames covered with wire mesh and marked by orange flags, many built by city staff, others by volunteers.

Volunteers and local residents visiting the park helped identify nests; anyone who saw a turtle digging was asked to call the Turtle Protectors’ hotline (647-491-4057), and volunteers came and remained nearby to ensure the mothers’ safety.

“We’re trying to balance a population that has gotten out of balance,” said Davis.

Volunteers continue to monitor the nests, waiting for the eggs to hatch to keep count of the hatchlings that emerge and give them a chance to make it safely to Grenadier Pond. Some species have eggs that hatch within 60 to 90 days; other hatchlings won’t emerge until spring 2023.

“It has been a real gift and honour to be able to do this work and tend to these relationships with other beings in a good way and to be out on the land,” said Crawley.

There is also a chance to “experience the joy of people who are giddy about seeing the turtles nesting and laying eggs,” added Davis.

They have a vision of encouraging other Indigenous-led Turtle Protector groups that empower people to protect turtles in the parks near their own homes.

“Everyone can be a turtle protector,” Davis said



How to protect a turtle

- If you see a turtle crossing the road, keep it safe and help it by moving it in the direction it is going. Remember, it has a reason for its trip.
- If you need to move a snapping turtle, use a shovel or a car mat to lift it, not your hands. They are feisty.
- When you see a turtle digging a nest, don't spook her; stay back five to 10 metres.
- In High Park, report the nest so volunteers can place a protector on the spot. Call the Turtle Protectors' hotline at 647-491-4057.
- If you want to help but live elsewhere, find out if there is a local turtle protection organization. The local conservation authority is a good starting point.
- If you know places with a lot of nests, you might want to establish safe nesting spots using sand and gravel.

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