

Turtles and Frogs and Reptiles...Oh My!

Nicole Dufort, who many of you met this summer at the Marketplace and Regatta Turtle Table, recently attended the Canadian Herpetological Society (CHS) annual conference in Fredericton, NB. The CHS is dedicated to research and conservation of Canada's reptiles and amphibians. (Herpetology is the study of turtles, snakes, frogs and salamanders).

Some interesting things she learned:

- Ontario researchers from U of T studied vocalizations in turtles, Scientists heard painted turtles making noises such as chirping, hissing and squawking depending on which sex was "talking" and when. And baby snapping turtles in their eggs "speak" to each other to coordinate when they will hatch from their nest!
- Many turtles overwinter at the bottom of lakes like Kosh, and some dig into the mud in marshes and shallow ponds. Both places can be very risky. Turtles hibernating in shallow wetlands can experience severe freezing-related injuries to the top of their shells and the bone underneath. And small areas of shell sticking up above the ice can be gnawed on by rodents looking for a calcium source. It can take years for a turtle to heal from these injuries. Nesting deep in a lake avoids that, but if an otter family inhabits the lake that year, they can spend the winter feasting on turtles. A cold-blooded turtle moves much too slowly in the winter to be able to defend itself.
- Turtles basking on logs are often in family groups and help each other with increased ability to spot predators.
- Wood turtles are among the rarest turtles in Ontario and spend much of their time in the forest. They are highly susceptible to habitat loss from logging. Scientists are now determining the best size of the boundary that needs to be set between a logged area and known Wood Turtle habitat.
- We see many frogs around Kosh. Sometimes, if you are very lucky you will see a blue frog. The presence of blue-coloured Green Frogs is surprisingly widespread throughout Ontario but they are still very rare with fewer than one in a thousand.
- Just as we return home from the cottage every weekend, some toads do the same. They use visual cues, an internal geomagnetic compass like a GPS and even sky cues to guide them. Researchers put toads into opaque boxes and moved them in different directions on a beach, and a day later the toads found their way home even from a distance of 500 metres away. For a five-cm toad, that is quite amazing! This has interesting implications for attempting to reintroduce species in new areas. Even though we may think a new area is suitable, the animals might not agree and may die trying to find their way home.
- Reptiles and amphibians are certainly not boring animals like many people might believe!
- If anyone wants to learn more and you have a Facebook account, you can join! Two of the best groups are Ontario Reptile and Amphibian Atlas and Canadian Herpetological Society.

- If you want to contribute to community science, using the iNaturalist app is a great way to start. This is a global app supported by the Canadian Wildlife Federation where you can upload photos of plants and animals for identification. This data is used to track species, their populations and their range.