



Katie Porter, conservation co-ordinator with Nova Scotia Nature Trust, holds a day-old Blanding's turtle that recently emerged from a nest at McGowan Lake Turtle Sanctuary. The little reptile, about the size of a toonie, was measured, weighed and notched for identification, then sent on its way.

TLC for tiny, rare critters

Endangered Blanding's turtles
getting special attention from
the Nova Scotia Nature Trust

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Jeffie McNeil, species at risk biologist, shows the underbellies of a male and female Blanding's turtle she and her colleagues have documented and studied for years in the McGowan Lake Turtle Sanctuary. The turtles are handled only for research purposes.

Jeffie McNeil wades through the tall swampy grasses looking for Snub, a two-footed turtle.

He may be near Lumpy, who once had a tumour. Or Cupcake, the offspring of Muffin. Or Squirt or Sneaky or any of the other elusive slowpokes in the boggy northern Queens County wilderness.

But as the cute names mount and the mud on her pants rises, the reptilian stars of the McGow-

an Lake Turtle Sanctuary continue to hide in the July heat. Perhaps not surprising, considering Blanding's turtles are so threatened and so rare.

In fact, they're on both Canadian and Nova Scotia endangered species lists.

And less than 500 of them remain in the province, about 80 on or near this serene, protected South Shore habitat owned by the Nova Scotia Nature Trust.

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But people like McNeil, a species-at-risk biologist with the nearby Mersey Tobeatic Research Institute in Kempt, and Katie Porter, a conservation co-ordinator with the nature trust, are trying to change that. To give these creatures with a potential 80-year lifespan a fighting chance to reach that increasingly elusive goal.

They, and others, provide everything from protected land to protected nests to help these friendly, vulnerable — and, Porter says, “charismatic,” “calm” and “cute” — creatures thrive.

Not to mention hours and hours of time waiting and watching over the lumbering yellow-throated animals with the spotted shells and the protruding, curious eyes that blink and turn toward visitors a few months down the road.

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McNeil has been studying them for about 15 years. She's stayed up all night to watch them lay their eggs. She's sat on the side of the road to make sure they don't get hit by cars.

She's taken the toonie-sized babies — with just a one per cent survival rate — in the palm of her hand and gently clipped their fingernail-thin shells, making distinctive marks that could later help researchers learn whether they've escaped the raccoons and cars and pollution and shore flooding that shorten their lives.

"This is one of the nesting sites," she says now, out of the swamp and on dry, pebbly land where volunteers have constructed cages — plywood covered in mesh and held down by rocks — to protect the eggs from predators.

"You can't really see it but the nest is sort of buried in the ground, probably 10 centimetres



Jeffie McNeil, species-at-risk biologist, holds an adult Blanding's turtle in the McGowan Lake Turtle Sanctuary. Katie Porter, left, conservation co-ordinator with the Nova Scotia Nature Trust, and McNeil document and study the turtles and their nests. **TOP: WYNNE - GOLF**

bog, always a good sign when the population of a species is so low.

Elizabeth, "a pretty friendly girl," is now in her hands; healthy and curious, sliding her neck in and out of her shell as McNeil flips her upside down to estimate her age (middle-aged, she figures, since the growth rings these turtles form until they reach 20 have long since faded away).

The turtle she has dubbed Tiberius — "I'm a Trekkie so this is Capt. Kirk's middle name," she explains with a laugh — tumbles in a rubber tub.

She checks him out too, estimating he's at least 24, and weighs maybe 1,500 grams compared with Elizabeth's 900 or so.

She and Porter eventually carry the pair back to their watery home and head to the protected nests that lay hidden just a few months before.

So far this fall about 25 hatchlings have emerged from six of 10 known nests in the area — "moderate" success, McNeil says, compared with a "banner" year at

really long time covering the eggs back up and concealing it so when she's finished, you can't tell that there's a nest there at all, just by looking."

McNeil and others have watched this mysterious, fascinating, nighttime process as the mothers meticulously scope out the best areas for their eggs, then plant their front feet in the soil and use their back feet to dig and dig and dig again.

"When she does actually lay her eggs at that point in time, they go into sort of a trance," she says. "And they can't be scared away. So the volunteers are able to come up behind them and . . . watch them when they pop out the eggs and count how many eggs there were and wait until the female finishes and buries and conceals the nest and walks off and then the volunteer places the nest cage over the top of the nest to protect it."

Sometimes this takes all night — or nights. McNeil laughs thinking about one evening with a particularly lazy Lumpy, whose namesake throat lump was removed by a veterinarian long ago.

"She fell asleep while she was covering over the nest so you're sitting there . . . at 2 o'clock in the



Screens cover turtle nests along the side of the road in the McGowan Lake Turtle Sanctuary. Placed by volunteers, the screens protect the turtle eggs from predators such as raccoons.

morning watching this turtle have a snooze."

She's also watched them walk away from their offspring, as these creatures do forever after they've buried their eggs.

"She never sees the nest or the babies again," explains the scientist, who started studying the species while doing her honours thesis at Acadia University and

became "so fascinated" she says "I'm still here."

"That's just the way that turtles have evolved . . . so the little guys have to dig their way out of the ground and then they sort of disperse . . . Unlike some turtle species like sea turtles — you often see them running toward the water. These guys don't do that; they often go off in various

different directions and they try to find usually moist spots."

The babies and adults often go off the 27 hectares set aside for the McGowan Lake Turtle Sanctuary too. They wander to the opposite side of the lake which is Crown land that researchers hope will also soon be declared a protected habitat.

"They actually walk down the road," Porter says of the animals that also often nest on the pebbly shoulders of nearby highways.

"They go in between different habitats where they overwinter or nest or feed, so they use kind of a big range of areas and so if you have one little piece protected and then the rest isn't, they're vulnerable."

Most vulnerable are the feather-weight babies, still forming in their shells in their subterranean shelters as the summer sun beats down on the dusty dry rock and the researchers wait for time to pass.

By mid-September, the green foliage has turned a fluorescent red, yellow and gold. And the conservationists are still watching over turtles, big and small.

On this crisp fall day, McNeil finds a full-grown Elizabeth and even bigger Tiberius mating in the

standing s turtle nesting habitat that has seen about 150 newborns.

But today, miles away, up from the depths, there's one more.

"Here's one," McNeil says as a tiny grey-shelled being blends in under a rock in the covered nest — near the telltale holes it crawled through to reach the surface.

Its body feels as light as a wisp of wind. Its face is the size of a bead; its eyes are pencil dots that blink and turn to the strange new world.

McNeil measures and weighs the still dirt-dusted newborn (just 10 grams). Checks all its teeny parts and finds "no deformities." Then she sanitizes a nail clipper and cuts in strategically placed triangular shell notches for later identification. Porter helps her document it all in a coded ledger that details the year it was born and the nest it hatched from and its demeanour ("active") on this breezy autumn afternoon.

Then she sets it free.

The petite day-old hatchling, its gender still unknown, barely moves — tiny eyes scoping out the great unknown under the sun.

And McNeil steps away, thinking what she's thought so many times before.

"I always hope that I'm going to see them again someday."