

Turtle on the Road

by Hank Guarisco

During rainy spells, we can help nature by performing a good deed similar to the iconic boy scout good deed of helping little old ladies across the road. When traffic permits, we can stop and help turtles across the road.

During late spring, several kinds of turtles routinely make their appearance on Kansas roads. Large snapping turtles emerging from marshes and drainage ditches, lumber up onto elevated road beds to challenge the myriad cars and trucks speeding by. Ancient three-toed and ornate box turtles, which can live for 50 to 100 years, shyly make their way across highways. When danger approaches, they retreat into their shells until it has passed. Unfortunately, this behavior protects them against automobiles almost as well as the noxious spray of skunks protects them from traffic. Pond and painted turtles join the others in their march toward higher ground.

Females heavy with eggs seeking nesting places are the most common migrant. They must find locations that won't become flooded and have the right temperature for

their developing young. After warm spring rains, the earth becomes soft enough for the potential mothers to dig flask-shaped nests in the ground, deposit their eggs, and cover them. Unlike most animals, the sex of the young is determined by temperature during crucial phases of development within the egg. Each type of turtle has its own unique, optimal temperature for producing males or females.

Turtles are very vulnerable when they venture onto highways. In addition to being inadvertently struck by passing vehicles, a few people derive sadistic pleasure from purposely hitting them to hear them "pop." Years ago, one prominent Kansas herpetologist did an interesting experiment. He fitted a dead box turtle with a spike attached to a small wooden platform, then placed it on the shoulder, well away from the road. When he returned several days later, someone had invariably gone out of their way to run it over.

When traveling around the state, I often stop to take turtles off the highway. First, be sure it is safe to stop. Is there enough of a shoulder to pull your vehicle completely off the road? Don't stop if there are hills that obstruct the view of oncoming traffic. You want to rescue the turtle, not

become roadkill. Most turtles are easy to pick up and deposit at least 20 or 30 feet from the road. Be sure to place them on the side of the road in which they were headed. Some precautions are necessary when transferring large snapping turtles. They can be aggressive and incredibly quick when defending themselves. Distract the turtle with a stick, then grab it by the tail and carry it off the road. While doing this, make sure to hold the turtle well away from your legs.

Enjoy this wonderful family activity that brings us closer to nature and lets us nurture these amazing creatures.



Hank Guarisco is a biologist and came to Lawrence 48 years ago to study ecology at KU. He has studied spiders and snakes and published a number of scientific and popular pieces, the most recent being "*Pocket Guide of Kansas Spiders.*" Hank continues to be amazed at the natural world and revels in sharing this experience.