

# “Why did the Western Painted Turtle Cross the Centreline?”

Submitted by Leonard Sielecki, Environmental Issues Analyst



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Pets should be kept away from turtle nests.

The plight of baby turtles emerging from their nests near roads and highways in British Columbia recently caught the attention of the local and national media. Despite their armoured exterior and ancestry that goes back to the early dinosaurs, turtles are no match for motor vehicles. They are most vulnerable when attempting to cross roads and highways, and when motor vehicles park on top of turtle nesting sites located near shoulders and pullouts.

There are only four indigenous species of turtles in the province: the saltwater Leatherback Sea Turtle and Pacific Green Turtle; and the freshwater Western Pond Turtle and Western Painted Turtle. Of the freshwater species, Western Pond Turtles aren't extinct, but they haven't been seen in British Columbia since 1959.

Fortunately, Western Painted Turtles are still found in the Okanagan Valley, the Columbia Valley, the Lower Mainland, the Sunshine Coast, the Gulf Islands and on Vancouver Island. The interior Western painted turtle population is considered a species of “Special Concern” by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada and is “blue-listed” by the B.C. Ministry of Environment. The coastal population is considered “endangered” by the committee and is “red-listed” by the Ministry of Environment.

It is relatively easy to identify a Western Painted Turtle. The main features to look for are the

red-coloured bottom shell, called the “plastron,” with its black markings; and the bright yellow stripes on the head, neck, tail and legs. The back shell, or “carapace” can be black, brown or olive coloured, and reach 20 to 25 centimetres in length. Male turtles have longer claws on the forefeet than females, while the hind feet of both sexes are webbed.

Western Painted Turtles are found in ponds, lakes and streams with muddy bottoms, slow moving water, and emerging aquatic vegetation. On sunny days, the turtles can be found basking out of the water individually or in groups on logs or banks. They are not aggressive, often piling up on top of each other. These turtles feed, mate, sleep and do just about everything else in water. However, in the spring, females may travel as far as 350 metres inland to dig their nests and lay eggs. While the turtles are generally active during daylight hours, nest digging and egg laying usually occurs in the early morning and late evening in late June.

Females dig their nests with their hind feet. The nests are usually found in places with exposed soil, such as fields or pastures, beaches, and the shoulders of roads and highways. The nests are typically dug on slopes with southern exposure

and good drainage. The young hatch in late summer but overwinter in the nests and emerge the following spring. Emerging baby turtles are about the size of a Loonie. Western Painted Turtles mature slowly. Males reach reproductive age after four or more years while females take more than seven years.

This summer, I have been working closely with Christian Engelstoft, a biologist with Habitat Acquisition Trust, and June Pretzer, site manager at the Swan Lake Christmas Hill Nature Sanctuary. Just north of the Walmart in Victoria, we are monitoring Western Painted Turtle activity along Highway 17 at Swan Lake. The turtles came to the attention of the ministry after a number were killed on a nearby municipal road earlier in the spring. Luckily, no turtles have been reported killed along Highway 17.

If you find females turtles laying eggs, or turtle nesting sites, please do not disturb them. Females laying eggs are very sensitive to disturbance. You can help protect the turtles by keeping your dog away from the nesting sites, so your pet does not dig up the eggs or interfere with emerging baby turtles. Baby turtles are defenceless, small creatures.

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Western painted turtles have a red-coloured bottom shell with black markings; and bright yellow stripes on the head, neck, tail and legs.

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Contrary to common belief, turtles are not lost if you find them trying to cross a road or highway. While it is against the law to capture and transport turtles without a *Wildlife Act* permit, they can be moved out of danger by carrying them to a safe location in the direction they are headed. The turtles can be gently lifted from the sides, taking care not to grab their legs or tail, and avoiding their neck and head. If you carry a turtle across a road or highway, please exercise caution by watching for traffic and crossing only when safe to do so. It is recommended you wear clean, water-impermeable gloves when carrying a turtle, and wash your gloves thoroughly with soap and

water immediately afterwards. You should also wash your hands with soap and water, or use waterless hand sanitizer.

Should you find turtles crossing ministry roads or highways, or turtle nests along the shoulders, please contact the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure environmental staff as soon as possible. In the South Coast Region, contact Assistant Environmental Coordinators Joanne Cyr (604) 660-8072 or Amber Smith (604) 660-0339. In the Southern Interior Region, contact Environmental Services Manager Brent Persello at (250) 828-4197. In the Northern Region, contact Environmental Services Manager Daryl Nolan, at (250) 565-6484. ♦



Turtles are no match for vehicles.



Females travel inland to dig their nests and lay eggs.



The young turtles hatch in late summer but overwinter in nests.

## Employees Observe National Day of Mourning

Submitted by Scot Mortimer, Manager of Corporate Safety

The National Day of Mourning, held annually on April 28, is a day to remember workers who have lost their lives as a result of work-related accidents or occupational diseases.

The Day of Mourning is jointly observed by national and provincial labour, business and government organizations. This spring, a commemorative ceremony was jointly hosted by the B.C. Federation of Labour, the Business Council of British Columbia and WorkSafeBC, at the Vancouver Convention Centre's Jack Poole Plaza.

Representing the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure, Tracy Wynnyk, Provincial Occupational Risk and Safety Advisor, Provincial Field Services, and Scot Mortimer, Manager, Corporate Safety, laid a wreath in memory of the employees and contractors who have died on the job.

The ceremony is a solemn reminder of the importance of workplace safety.

Scot Mortimer and Tracy Wynnyk attended the day of mourning ceremony, on April 28.

