

Turtles embark on dangerous overland journey across N.H. roads

With nesting season underway, wildlife officials are asking motorists to slow down and watch for turtles

By [Amanda Gokee](#) Globe Staff, Updated May 24, 2023, 3:43 p.m.



Eastern box turtles, New Hampshire's only terrestrial turtle, are endangered. MELISSA WINTERS, NHFG NONGAME CERTIFIED WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST

All across New Hampshire, turtles are embarking on an overland journey from the vernal pools and wetlands where they spend the winter to their upland nesting sites.

That trek is an essential part of the turtles' life cycle, but it has become increasingly dangerous as development has eaten away at natural habitat, leaving several turtle species threatened or endangered.

Road crossings are a big problem for turtle populations that are on the decline, according to New Hampshire Fish and Game wildlife biologist Melissa Winters. The department issued an [advisory](#) this week, after turtle nesting season began in mid May. It will last through early July, reaching its peak in June when it's most likely motorists will encounter the creatures along the state's roadways.

"To cross a busy road, it's like running the gauntlet for them," Winters said. "It's difficult for them to get across safely."

She said research from the past 15 years in New Hampshire and the region has found that road mortality is a huge contributing factor to the decline in these species. Both males and females are on the go, as females leave their home ponds or wetlands to lay eggs and males travel to upland basking areas to breed and look for food.



Blanding's turtles, one of seven turtle species native to New Hampshire, are endangered.
JOSH MEGYESY, NHFG NONGAME WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST

Of the seven turtle species that are native to New Hampshire, several are in trouble. Eastern box turtles, the state's only terrestrial turtle, are endangered, as are Blanding's turtles. Spotted turtles are threatened. Wood turtles are considered a species of special concern.

But road mortality is a threat to all turtles in the state, including the most common species including eastern painted turtles and snapping turtles. It's common for the creatures to travel around a mile to reach their nesting sites, which they return to year after year.

"These are long-lived animals, and they have this internal compass," Winters said. "They know where they're going regardless of development or roads. They'll still make the same trek to the same traditional nesting areas."

Turtles can live into their 70s, which is a lot of time for new roads and houses to get built introducing new obstacles along their habitual route. And more

development means more predators, according to Winters. That includes skunks, raccoons, and foxes that prey on turtles and their nests.

Turtles don't reach sexual maturity until they're around 15 years old, and Winters said that means the loss of even one female can be catastrophic for the overall population. Deer can have hundreds of offspring in the time it takes a turtle to reach reproductive age.

Here's what Fish and Game recommends you do to protect turtles.

- Keep an eye out for turtles on the road. Drive slowly and carefully.
- Help turtles cross the road in the direction they are already traveling, but only if you can do so safely. Be extra careful with snapping turtles or just let them cross on their own.
- Don't bring turtles home. All turtles are protected under New Hampshire law during nesting season, and other species are protected throughout the year.
- Don't move the turtle away from where you find it. These guys know where they are going, and moving them to another place can stress them out or even kill them if they can't adjust to the new location.
- If you find an injured turtle, call Fish and Game's wildlife division at 603-271-2461. They can provide a list of licensed wildlife rehabilitators. You can also visit wildnh.com/nongame/turtles-injured.html for more information.
- You can report turtle sightings to Fish and Game's reptile and amphibian reporting program at nhwildlifesightings.unh.edu.
- Spread garden mulch soon to prevent turtles from nesting there. If you have to leave a pile sitting for a few days, cover it with plastic to make it less appealing to nesting turtles.

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