

Living on Turtle Time

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A painted turtle nests in loose, well-drained soil. photo © Brett Amy Thelen

Lately I've had a hard time remembering what day it is. More than once, I've woken in a panic in the middle of the night, unsure whether it was Wednesday or Saturday. Was I late for another Zoom meeting? Had I missed the weekly window for grocery pickup at our local farm? To paraphrase the beloved, departed John Prine, sometimes the days just flow by like a broken-down dam.

But the natural world keeps its own time, and following that calendar can help us catch our breath, even – and perhaps especially – amid the uncertainty of a human world in turmoil.

When the need for self-isolation first arose, it was sugaring season. Then came salamander season, and the explosive energy of thousands of amphibians marching toward their breeding pools in the dark rain. Slowly, in late April and early May, spring wildflower season unfurled. It started with coltsfoot

emerging from the salt-encrusted hardpack on the edge of dirt roads and the tiny, honeyed blossoms of trailing arbutus. Then came trillium, trout lily, spring beauty, the ethereal floating discs of hobblebush.

Now it's turtle time. On warm afternoons, painted turtles bask on sun-drenched logs, slipping back to the safety of the muddy pond bottom when cloud cover or the shadow of a passing canoe interrupts their light. When that mossy boulder you spy on your early-season paddle slowly submerges itself and swims off, you may realize that it is, in fact, a snapping turtle.

From mid-May through early July, roads offer another opportunity for turtle spotting, as female turtles must leave the protection of the water to search for loose, well-drained soil in which to lay their eggs. Most of our local turtle species don't travel far – snapping and painted turtle nests are typically located within 100 feet of the water's edge – but they often select nest sites along sandy road shoulders, bringing them into contact with humans, and with our cars.

Over the years, roadkill has taken a considerable toll on turtles. If you see one attempting to cross the road this spring, consider doing a good deed: if it's safe for you to stop – and only if it's safe – pull over, turn on your blinkers, and help that turtle across the road.

Here are a few tips for aspiring turtle crossers:

Roads near lakes, ponds, and wetlands can be particularly turtle-y places in spring and early summer. Whenever you're approaching water, slow down, way down, and be prepared to stop for turtles.

Always move turtles in the direction they were heading when you found them; they know where they're going, and it might not be the water, especially if they've yet to lay their eggs.

Never hold turtles by their tails, as this could cause serious injury to the very animals you're trying to protect. Instead, pick small turtles up around the center of their bodies. Large snappers, as their name suggests, require special care, but can be moved on sheets or shovels or dragged gently by the rear of their shells.

Never take turtles home with you. Along with habitat loss and road mortality, the pet trade is a major threat to turtle populations worldwide. Wild turtles belong in the wild.

Turtle Time

I always get a little thrill out of seeing a turtle, especially if I've moved it out of harm's way. This year, though, I think turtles might have something even more to offer us – something existential in nature.

Turtles have changed little over the last 200 million years, earning them a distinction described by one Smithsonian writer as “creatures who are entitled to regard the brontosaur and mastodon as brief

zoological fads.” They are also slow-growing and remarkably long-lived: if they make it past their first few years without becoming raccoon or heron food and are fortunate enough to evade the car tire after that, snappers may live more than a century. In northern climates, female snapping turtles don’t even reach reproductive maturity until 15-20 years of age. Along the way, they spend a great many hours regulating their body temperature by basking – what you and I would call “lying around in the sun.” It may look lazy, but it’s not; studies have shown that basking aids in both digestion and egg development.

In other words, at scales both evolutionary and quotidian, turtles take their time.

As we humans grapple with the discomfort of having our own lives slowed to a crawl, our professional and social and educational spheres narrowed to a small radius surrounding our own metaphorical ponds, can we learn from the dinosaurs outside our door? Can we move away from travel plans and to-do lists toward the simplicity of afternoons spent basking in the spring sunlight? Can we trust that we too are still growing, even if it’s at a pace too slow to see, as we make our way, unhurried, through the mire?

Ask a birder or gardener or hunter and they will doubtless name different “seasons” for the exact same months, but underneath it’s all the same: pay attention, get outside whenever you’re feeling a little lost or overwhelmed and, for now, try to take things slow. 🐾



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