



The Wilder Side of Oakland County

by Jonathan Schechter

Blanding's Turtles (*Emydoidea blandingii*) have been on the move in Oakland County since mid-April after they emerged from winter brumation; their equivalent of hibernation. These strikingly attractive semi-aquatic turtles are easily identified by their bright yellow chin and throat that colorfully set them apart from the rest of Michigan's 10 species of turtles. In the Ojibway language the name of the turtle translates to "the turtle with the sun under its chin." A close look at Blanding's Turtle reveals another interesting feature; light dots across their high-domed carapace; commonly known as the top of the turtle.



They are something of isolationists, unlike Painted Turtles which may line up together in large numbers to bask on sunny logs jutting into wetlands. Even though they are very much at home in Oakland County, Blanding's Turtles are not often seen, except when they lumber ashore for mating or egg-laying.

I often meander the trails at Independence Oaks County Park to start my day and usually circle around Crooked Lake with an eye out for waterfowl and migrating songbirds. If it's a sunny day I almost always see Painted Turtles sunning on partially submerged logs. I was headed for the Ted Gray Trail near the south end of Crooked Lake when I had my first encounter with a Blanding's Turtle this year.

My arrival time was perfect for just as I approached the boardwalk before the steep uphill climb a Blanding's Turtle with a still moist shell lumbered across the trail in front of me. Based on the season I suspect it was on a mating mission with egg-laying almost a month away. I watched it meander past marsh marigolds and slowly enter the woodlands. I opted not to follow and cause a behavioral distraction.

Blanding's Turtles are semi-aquatic "habitat" specialists that require shallow clean water with abundant vegetation and soft muddy bottoms. Those conditions are found in many natural areas within our county including our Oakland County Parks, Huron-Clinton Metroparks and lands protected by Blue Heron Headwaters Conservancy.

A bit of research and collaboration with my herpetologist friend James Harding revealed that Blanding's Turtles are a very long-lived species with some getting into their 70s. They are also vulnerable and under threat in many locations from development, drainage projects and pollution. Thankfully the population at Independence Oaks County Park is safe and secure.



The traditional range of the Blanding's Turtle is centered around our Great Lakes Region and they are protected as a "species of special concern" by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) which indicates a declining species. They are protected under Michigan law, specifically DNR Fisheries Order 224.25, which prohibits the "taking, killing or selling of wild reptiles, amphibians and their eggs".

Habitat loss is a significant reason causing their decline. Wetland habitat and nesting areas these turtles depend on are often threatened by housing developments, commercial buildings and roads that bisect their habitat. As a side note - I'm one of those people who will help a turtle cross a road. If you do so too, always take them in the direction they are going.

Blanding's Turtles inhabit clean, shallow waters with abundant aquatic vegetation and soft muddy bottoms over firm substrates. Females nest in open uplands adjacent to wetland habitats, preferring sunny areas with moist but well-drained sandy or loamy soil; common conditions in many parks in southeast Michigan. They will also nest in lawns, fields or even gravel road embankments if suitable natural nesting habitat is not readily available.

Of note, Blanding's Turtles don't tend to reproduce until they are 20 years old. They are also of interest in longevity research and are capable of reproducing into their eighth or ninth decade of life! And the eggs, if not dug up by raccoons or skunks, won't hatch for two or three months. If you are fortunate enough to encounter a Blanding's Turtle crawling about in May, give her plenty of room. I say her, since it will most likely be female coming on shore again to lay her eggs on the wilder side of Oakland County.

Oakland County Parks staffer Jonathan Schechter is an avid "nature-embracing" hiker who follows phenology - the study of natural cycles of nature's way - to inspire his blogs.





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