



Jane Charmelo

out & about

Blanding's 'grandturtles' released to the wild Captive breeding program at Brookfield Zoo part of 'head start'



FPDDC PHOTO Lombardian

Blanding's turtles (*Emydoidea blandingii*) have a friend in Dan Thompson (right), a Forest Preserve District of DuPage County (FPDDC) ecologist, who has been concerned about their population for over 20 years. He thought to select some offspring of deceased mother turtles to be used in a captive breeding program at Brookfield Zoo. Now, the "grandturtles" were recently released into the wild to increase the genetic diversity of the species. At left is Jeff Bocek, senior animal care specialist for the Chicago Zoological Society.

The Forest Preserve District of DuPage County (FPDDC) "head start" program that is focused on increasing the population of Blanding's turtles celebrated a new milestone this year: releasing "grandchildren" of deceased Blanding's turtles—thus contributing to the genetic diversity within their forest preserve habitats.

That's according to FPDDC ecologist Dan Thompson, who has been with the district for 31 years, 21 of which have been studying the Blanding's turtles and their numbers. He said the species is considered "state-endangered," after studies showed them to be waning in population.

Thompson explained that back in the late 1980s and early 1990s, his predecessor, Dan Ludwig, was studying the amphibian and reptile population, adding, "That kind of teased out what species are more common [and] not so common."

He said staff focused on the Blanding's turtles, then went back and looked at where they were living.

What they found was that most of the turtles were middle-aged and older; as much as 30 years old or more.

Thompson added that the turtles can live as long as 80 years.

"We were not getting juveniles," he continued, but "sub-adults," and the cause of that was unclear at first.

Upon further investigation of the turtles' habitat, "It quickly opened our eyes that it was nest predation," Thompson recalled, adding the Blanding's turtles have several factors that put them in potential peril.

They reach reproduction age later than other species, lay fewer eggs (just over a dozen) and typically once a year, they move around more over the landscape and they "need a higher quality habitat," he noted, adding that it is not just eggs that are subject to predators.

Born at roughly the size of a quarter, the Blanding's turtle hatchlings are still only about 4 inches long by their first year (12 inches as an adult), and are subject to predation by birds and fish as well, thus contributing to their endangered status.

Additionally, changing conditions outside of the forest preserves, such as new parking lots and other developments, have contributed to the loss of habitat, and also forced the turtles to move around more—even forcing them to cross streets, Thompson said.

There are "a lot of factors at play," he emphasized, also pointing out that the nests are situated in shorter vegetation to ensure sunlight to keep the eggs warm, further exposing them to predation.

Thus, the early life of a Blanding's turtle is "more challenging and riskier," Thompson commented.

The ecologist said that in 1996, the FPDDC started collecting eggs and taking them to Willowbrook Wildlife Center in Glen Ellyn, which is part of the FPDDC. Once hatched, they first

went to Cosley Zoo in Wheaton, where early protocol had them being raised for roughly two years before being released.

"We try to be as hands-off as possible," he said of raising the young turtles for eventual release.

The FPDDC added to its "nursery" partners—including the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum, Shedd Aquarium, St. Charles Park District, Forest Preserve District of Will County and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources—and the hatchlings were being released after a year. Thompson said the district would release as many as 200 of them a year.

He said that for him, "the diversity of genetics" became a concern, in part because the turtles were basically "locked in" by loss of habitat.

"I decided to start setting aside a few offspring" of turtles that had died, Thompson said, and that's where Brookfield Zoo comes in.

Long-lived and slow-breeding, the ecologist continued, some of the turtles slated to be released instead went to Brookfield Zoo, which began a captive breeding program in a predator-proof environment. They have received wild-born juvenile turtles since 2011, according to the FPDDC.

Just how does he know who belongs to whom, one might wonder?

Thompson said the district keeps a database, having marked the turtles and using microchips, to know which turtles came from which mothers.

Consequently, the captive-bred turtles, offspring of deceased mothers, have now reproduced the grandturtles that were recently released, he said.

In actuality, the ecologist noted, with the Blanding's turtle, "The older they are, the more fertile they become!"

Thompson said other states are also working to increase the Blanding's turtle population, and the agencies share information about their methods.

"We all want everyone's programs to be prosperous," he continued, adding, "It all comes down to resources."

In a district release, Andy Snider, curator of herps and aquatics for the Chicago Zoological Society stated, "It has been remarkable to provide these turtles with a unique habitat suitable to their survival. The dedication from the animal care staff to this program is now coming to fruition as these year-old turtles are released to the wild."

"We're proud to be investing resources, time and effort on this important native species that resides in our own backyards," he added.

The bottom line for Thompson is not only increasing the population of these small turtles, but ensuring genetic diversity among them.

"Each year the numbers should slowly be building," he anticipates, but even beyond the turtles, the efforts to save these animals "benefit many other [animals], not just Blanding's."

For more information about the FPDDC, visit dupageforest.org.

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