

1995 BLANDING'S TURTLE SURVEY, SW MN CONCLUSION

The Blandings Turtle is named by the Dakota people... "the turtle that walks in the hills." So far...at least in Southwest Minnesota...this still seems to be the case.

As of August 1, 1995, the Blandings population has been documented in five separate areas in four counties: Lincoln, Pipestone, Murray, and Nobles. All of these populations are in direct association with the prairie highlands generally referred to as buffalo ridge.

The creeks and rivers have, over time, cut down through the ancient glacial deposits creating gravel up lands which these turtles seem to prefer for nesting.

Because four of these colonies are found in tributaries of the Rock River, it seems only a matter of time until they are found in Rock County. Especially the males or young ones that may use the waterways directly connected to the main channel for possible migrations or wandering behavior.

The fact that a female may travel up to a mile to find a suitable nest site brings up the question of how far a turtle would travel over land to find new living space. Any future researchers who go out looking for these turtles should not limit their search in only the areas of likely habitat but should indeed intensely survey and investigate every creek, river, cattail marsh or stock pond encountered.

Recent findings during the past five years have turned up Blandings Turtles in some unusual places: walking across a street of a small town...lumbering across an open bean field... etc.

With this in mind any field researcher should keep in mind the possibility that a Blandings Turtle could pop up anywhere!

Another recommendation for further research is the nesting behavior: Nesting takes place in June. The peak of this activity...as far as I have determined...only takes place during a period of three to five days. Actually, to be more accurate, three to five nights. Gravid females leave the water at about 5:00 pm and arrive at the top of the hills and ridges at about 7:00...where they begin to search for a nest site which takes them far into the night.

I propose that during the nesting season of 1996... a minimum of six researchers be placed in certain nesting areas: two at the hills bordering the east edge of Altona... two at the north branch of the Chanarambie Creek Valley and two more walking the edge of the crop land surrounding the Burke Mgmt. Area. If separate contractors are hired for this...they should be given the option to hire on "subcontractors". In other words...the more the merrier!

With growing interest in herpetology in general all across the state...there may also be a

good possibility of finding some dedicated volunteers that would gladly spend a few days or a week walking the hills and prairies of these areas.

The mortality rate of nests is high for any turtle. Natural predators take their toll. However...the racoon population seems to be exploding and there is the threat from a relatively new predator...the cultivator.

All of the turtles at _____ seemed intent to lay their eggs in open, cultivated fields of beans and corn. Now...if any of those eggs by chance survive the threat of predator and plow...then it seems unlikely that any of those eggs would receive enough sunlight for incubation as the crops grew and matured.

This may be a controversial proposal but I would suggest that any nest of Blandings Turtles, if found, be very carefully dug up and transported to be artificially incubated and hatched. This of course would only be done by those that have previous experience in hatching turtle eggs in the past.

Hatchlings would then be returned in the fall and released directly into the same wetland where the female was found.

Or the hatchlings could be kept in captivity during the autumn...be well fed and be given the opportunity of a brief hibernation period during their first winter.

The young would be kept for a few more weeks and again be fed and cared for until well into their first spring...then be directly released into their respective home wetland area.

This may seem like a desperate and unnatural procedure...but I am convinced that the majority of Blandings in southwest Minnesota are on their way out!

During the past two months of intense searching in the four S.W. counties...I failed to find these turtles in three of the areas where they have been previously documented. And... the only area where I found them on a daily basis...I never located a turtle that was smaller than seven inches in length or younger than 10-15 years old.

Therefore...I would recommend...that at some time during this fall or winter, a conference or casual get-together be arranged so that all of those interested or have had direct experience with this species come together and decide what...if anything...could or should be done to ensure the future of these very unique turtles.

I personally have fallen in love with Blandings Turtles! I would be more than glad to do all I can to futher insure their continued existence in southwest Minnesota and all across their natural range.

Sincerely,
Thomas P. Jessen