


Wildlife rehabilitation centre attempts first turtle shell fracture repair



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HILDEN – Helene Van Doninck was excited to see poop in her new patient’s pen recently.

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That just means the turtle, who sports an innovative bridge made just for his fractured shell, is eating.

The painted turtle is one of 32 animals rehabilitating at Cobequid Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre (CWRC) and he is the test subject for Van Doninck, animal rehabilitator and treasurer of CWRC, to try out a method of turtle shell fracture repair she’s never tried before.

When a driver had found the turtle injured on the side of the road and brought him in June 12, Van Doninck contacted a veterinarian friend in Virginia, Dave McCruer, who has mastered his own technique of turtle shell fracture repair.

“(McCruer’s) technique is to use epoxy, like what plumbers use,” said Van Doninck. “So we bought some medical-grade epoxy and stainless steel. We cut little strips and bridged (the fracture). The good thing about this method is we can still clean around the wound.”

The turtle’s shell has healed to the point where he’s allowed to swim in shallow water and Van Doninck is readying a bigger tank where he will be more comfortable.

“He’s doing okay,” said Van Doninck. “I mean, he doesn’t like us - he hisses when we handle him and tries to get away, but he seems to be getting better.”

As she cleaned up the turtle’s cage, a baby raven squawked repeatedly from the garage and staff prepared to take in a baby ring-necked pheasant.

Van Doninck is in the middle of her busy season, May through September, when she fields a lot of calls from people who see all sorts of different injured and abandoned baby animals across the county.

“We get calls about turtles a lot,” she said. “A lot of people don’t know we have turtles in Nova Scotia and that’s astonishing to me.”

She advises anybody who sets out to move a turtle from the side of the road to at least keep it pointed in the direction it was going in the first place.

“It was going somewhere,” she said. “So if you point it in another direction, it’s just going to turn around and keep going.”

She also pointed out it is illegal to keep any of Nova Scotia's four indigenous turtles - wood, painted, snapping and blandings - as pets.

Painted turtle facts:

- Most wide-spread native turtle in North America
- Fossil records show it has existed for 15 million years
- Adult turtles can live for 55 years
- Most commonly found in quiet bodies of water, but painted turtles also like to bask in the sun
- In Algonquin folklore, the painted turtle is known as a trickster