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Exploring Our Little Corner of the World with the Galiano Naturalists

by Pam Freir

Q: Why did the turtle cross the road?

A: Good question. Because, unlike your average chicken, turtles don't simply cross the road to get to the other side. There's method in their madness. In the case of the painted turtle from Laughlin Lake it was a matter of finding just the right spot to start a family.

Several islanders have reported seeing a pair of painted turtles dozing on a sunny log in Laughlin Lake. But one day last summer one lucky observer happened along just when Mrs. Turtle was embarking on her road trip. She plodded her way safely to the other side of Vineyard Way, scratched out a shallow depression in the gravel shoulder, and laid her eggs. Then, having done what a turtle's got to do, she headed back to her log for a nap.

Several turtle watchers kept their eye on things over the rest of the summer. There was a lot of hand-wringing involved: surely the nest was too close to the road! When would the babies hatch? And how could they possibly make their way to the lake in safety? Little did we know that this particular patch of gravel was not a random choice for a nest site but a carefully considered one. And that, once hatched, the baby turtles had no intention of making a dash for safety any time soon.

The female turtle had chosen a nesting spot well away from the lake where the earth was cool. Her eggs needed heat. But just how much heat is a question only a mother turtle can decide. If the sun is strong and temperatures reach 30 C. (87 F.) the hatchlings will be female. At more moderate

temperatures, around 25 C., they will be male. So from a family planning point of view the best place to raise kids is where the average daytime temperature remains somewhere between these two extremes. We can only hope that our neighbourhood turtles got the brood they were hoping for. The babies were never seen. And they weren't seen because no one knew when to look.

Incubation takes about 76 days. Our turtle guardians watched and waited but at the end of September there was still no sign of activity at the nest site. What nobody knew at the time was that these tiny (inch-long) hatchlings don't just pop from their shells and hit the road: they actually stay in the nest all winter. Incredibly, when the ground freezes, they freeze with it—and still manage to survive! A miraculous and complicated metabolic make-over takes place that protects their cells and body fluids to temperatures as low as -10 C. Meanwhile, mom and dad spend the winter in a state of happy dormancy burrowed below the frost line in the muddy bottom of Laughlin Lake. It's not an easy life but it must be a good one: painted turtles have been known to live for twenty years.

Although the average painted turtle has a carapace length of about 10 inches, local reports suggest that our pair may be somewhat larger. And when they heave themselves up on to their favourite log you may be able to see the orange plastron (the front bit) and the yellowish stripes on the neck and head. The bigger of the two, the one with the thinner tail, is the female.

Happy wandering! And remember: always travel with your eyes wide open.

THE GALIANO NATURALISTS is a group of people who have come together with a common purpose: to better understand and appreciate our island landscape and the creatures that inhabit

it. Many in our group have spent years observing, recording and sharing information about the natural world around us. Others are simply curious explorers, learning as we go. We meet every month or so to plan walks and other events and we will be reporting in on a regular basis here in The Active Page. Everyone's welcome to join in with ideas, expertise, or to just tag along. If you'd like to be on our mailing list to find out more about what's happening when please contact Pam at 539-3322 or by email to: galianonaturalists@gulfislands.com.



Sketch of Turtle by Shauna Anderson