



Final Report - Win this Race: A Project to Secure Critical Wetland Habitat for Blanding's
Turtle and Eastern Ribbon Snake

Nova Scotia Nature Trust

For Department of Natural Resources Species at Risk Conservation Fund

June 4, 2009

Project goal and objectives

The primary goal of the project is to secure and manage priority wetland habitats supporting the Blanding's turtle and Eastern ribbon snake. Landowners of priority wetland habitats will be engaged to permanently protect priority wetland and nesting habitat through land acquisition (donation or purchase) or legally-binding conservation easement.

The project will also reduce human-caused threats to habitat through public outreach and education for people of all ages that own property and/or participate in recreation around these wetland areas. The project will engage volunteers to assist in the long-term care and management of protected areas for these endangered species through stewardship activities. These education and stewardship activities are vital in the recovery of this species.

The first objective of the project was to save priority habitats as Conservation Lands. This is initially achieved through targeted landowner contact and outreach, then through the permanent protection of lands through legal agreement, purchase, or donation to the Nature Trust.

The second objective of the project was to build effective long-term stewardship capacity for protected wetland habitat through community outreach, public education, and stewardship activities. Outreach to the communities that contain Blanding's turtle and Eastern ribbon snake habitat is also vital to encourage future securement opportunities.

Outline of the work completed

The first objective was achieved through working with partners at Acadia, MTRI, DNR, and in communities, to identify the current top priority properties for acquisition (this database of both the ecological characteristics of properties of interest, and communications with landowners, will continue to be maintained and used in the future). Targeted land owner outreach was conducted, followed by site visits to certain properties. Landowners of three properties were interested in pursuing permanent protection, and so negotiations began on what form the legal protection would take. Landowners who were not currently interested in pursuing permanent protection, or whose properties were not suitable for protection, had the option of entering into Stewardship Agreements (not legally binding, but are thought to potentially lead to permanent protection down the road). For permanently protected properties, Baseline Documentation Reports were completed, as were Stewardship Plans, and all other necessary legal work.

The second objective focused on building the community awareness necessary for stewardship of the protected lands, and for future conservation work in this area. The Nature Trust contacted and met with landowners, distributed education materials, recruited Property Guardians, and raised awareness through media stories.

Results

Land Securement: One of our biggest successes this year was the permanent protection of 3 properties that contain habitat for Blanding's turtle and/or Eastern ribbon snake.

Deep Brook Bog Conservation Lands (12 acres), in the Pleasant River watershed, is one of the most important over wintering grounds for the turtles in the entire province, and has now been permanently protected, thanks to Species at Risk Conservation Fund funding. A Baseline Documentation Report, and a Stewardship Plan, have been completed for this property.

Hog Lake Woods Pond Conservation Lands (52 acres) provides high priority habitat for the Pleasant River population of Blanding's turtles. This property has been transferred to the Crown, to be designated as a Nature Reserve. Although the Species at Risk Conservation Fund funding was not used for this purchase, it is related in that this success would not have been possible without the outreach work done in the Pleasant River area. The property is surrounded largely by undisturbed Crown land, which further increases the conservation value of the site. Many opportunities exist for furthering a land assembly project in this region.

Also of note is the securement of the Cameron Lake Conservation Lands (62 acres), which provides habitat for the Eastern ribbon snake AND the nationally *Threatened* Atlantic coastal plain flora species Carolina redroot. Although also not secured through Species at Risk Conservation Fund funding, outreach in the Pleasant River area makes positive conversations about property protection with local landowners possible.

The permanent protection of these 3 properties has increased habitat protection for Blanding's turtle and/or Eastern ribbon snake by 126 acres in the Pleasant River area, and the Species at Risk Conservation Fund was a critical partner in making this possible.

Eleven landowners with property of top priority for securement were contacted during the course of the project to introduce the idea of land securement. Since then, a further 19 landowners have been identified for contacting in summer 2009. Of the 11 landowners with priority lands, none signed a Stewardship Agreement, but 2 properties did move directly to the securement phase. Two properties were deemed unsuitable for securement (liability issues), and the remaining landowners will be contacted again in summer 2009 to further discussion about conservation opportunities (some are already progressing towards securement in 2009).

Landowner, community, and public outreach: The Nature Trust was a visible conservation partner in the Pleasant River community. Although we did not hold a property celebration in 2008 (to be held in summer 2009), we were involved in the event celebrating the release of Blanding's turtle hatchlings, held in Kejimikujik National Park and Historic Site in summer 2008. As a key partner of Acadia University (who run the hatchling rearing program) in saving Blanding's turtle and Eastern ribbon snake, we were pleased to support their successful work of increasing juvenile recruitment in Nova Scotian Blanding's turtle population. The event attracted over 100 people, including members of the nearby Bear River First Nation, local landowners, and park visitors. The Chronicle Herald produced a story about the event (attached), and PSAs were aired and printed by local and provincial media outlets.

Outreach focused on raising awareness about the plight of the Eastern ribbon snakes was completed in southwestern Nova Scotia, primarily in the Molega Lake area, in partnership with Acadia and Parks Canada. In December over 500 ribbon snake pamphlets were mailed out to all landowners on Molega Lake. Pamphlets were provided by Acadia University and mailed out by the Molega Lake Cottage Owners Association along with their annual newsletter. The newsletter also contained a short information piece about species at risk in the area and invited people to download the draft version of the Best Practices guide from the species at risk website. Around Molega Lake, 45 people were contacted, 34 snake pamphlets distributed, 26 stewardship guides were provided for review, and 15 SAR ID guides and 3 snake kits were given out. Due to the

season, many of the landowners contacted were year-round residents. Most were receptive and offered to report sightings of snakes.

Over 80 draft stewardship guides were distributed to landowners in southwest Nova Scotia (26 during Molega Lake landowner contact efforts, 60+ at public information sessions). These stewardship guides contain information about Best Practices for stewarding habitat for species at risk in southwestern Nova Scotia, including Blanding's turtle and Eastern ribbon snake. About 10 landowners gave formal suggestions on the guide. One landowner at Molega Lake donated a photo to be used in the guide. Another Molega Lake landowner, who extensively reviewed the guide, is now featured in it for his volunteer involvement in searching for ribbon snakes. Parks Canada has revised the guide, and it will be widely distributed by all partners working on species at risk in southwestern Nova Scotia in 2009.

General education materials about the Nature Trust have been distributed (mailed and handed out) in the project area, which include information on the Property Guardian program, and Blanding's turtle/Eastern ribbon snake habitat protection. These materials – the biannual newsletter, the 1-page info sheet, and the Property Guardian pamphlet – each reached over 1,000 people in Nova Scotia. In addition, interpretive signs are ready to be installed at the new protected properties.

Engage citizens in volunteer programs:

The Nature Trust's Property Guardian program is a provincial network of volunteers who help to monitor and carry out stewardship activities on our Conservation Lands. They also act as stewardship ambassadors in their communities, and are shining examples of active, conservation-minded citizens.

The program has 47 active Guardians, with 18 more waiting to be trained in summer 2009. Two group training sessions and several individual training sessions were held in summer 2008. We do not yet have Property Guardians for the 3 new Blanding's turtle/Eastern ribbon snake sites, but hope to have Guardians committed to them after the summer 2009 training sessions.

Property Guardians' data is used to track changes on properties that support Blanding's turtles and Eastern ribbon snake, and may be used if stewardship activities are deemed necessary. Guardians' data and stewardship work form an important component of our perpetual stewardship of our Conservation Lands.

An assessment of achievements and lessons learned

Three new properties (126 acres) that protect Blanding's turtle/Eastern ribbon snake habitat have been protected – what a success! The Department of Natural Resources, and other partners in the area, were critical in this conservation coup. General awareness about species at risk in southwestern Nova Scotia is quite high, and many landowners are very involved in stewardship activities.

The Nature Trust's team of Property Guardians is always growing, as it needs to be. As the Nature Trust acquires or protects new properties, we need to engage Nova Scotians in the stewardship needed to permanently monitor and maintain Conservation Lands. In 2009, we will make an effort to find Property Guardians specifically for the newly protected Blanding's turtles and Eastern ribbon snake properties. In addition, the volunteer management aspect of this program could be improved through more frequent communications, more recognition of their work, and more opportunities to provide feedback on the program.

Recommendations for follow-up steps to the project

- Continue to work closely with the Blanding's turtles and Eastern ribbon snake Recovery Teams, and other partners, to maintain and grow the strong culture of stewardship in the Pleasant River area.
- Work with the ACPF Recovery Team and ACPF researchers on identifying overlap of priority sites for protection (this is becoming more common on Molega and Shingle Lake).
- Recruit more Property Guardians in general, but also find specific Guardians for the 3 new Blanding's turtles and Eastern ribbon snake properties.
- Continue securement on properties "in the pipeline," and continue to engage landowners (especially those who have signed Stewardship Agreement) with the vision of permanently protecting priority Blanding's turtles and Eastern ribbon snake habitat.