

The Official Turtle Guardians

Wetland Watchers **Guidebook**



Everything you need to know while volunteering as a
Wetland Watcher with Turtle Guardians!



Welcome to Wetland Watchers!

IMPORTANT DISCLAIMER: The data you are collecting relates to Species at Risk, and therefore should not be shared with any third party (including any photos on social media) without expressed permission from The Land Between charity. This information is highly sensitive and needs to remain private to ensure the safety of these vulnerable species from the pet trade, poaching and deliberate persecution. Even the location of nest protectors is highly sensitive and should not be shared with any third party - there have been many instances of “nest-robbing” where nests that have been protected with cages are subsequently dug up by third parties to obtain the hatchlings. By signing up to become a volunteer with The Land Between and Turtle Guardians, you agree to help protect Ontario turtle species by keeping all turtle sighting data and nest location information private.

Your role

As a Wetland Watcher, you will monitor a wetland of your choosing at least once a week between the hours of 10 am and 1 pm. You will be looking for turtles in the wetland and recording the species that you observe. The species data you collect during your weekly surveys helps Turtle Guardians learn where turtle species occur and will allow us to identify important wetlands that need protection.

Selecting Your Wetland

Things to keep in mind when selecting your wetland are:

- Is it easily accessible?
- Is it on private property? If it is not your own property, we will need to obtain written permission from the property owner to enter for the duration of your volunteering. If you are interested in doing so, simply let us know the contact information of the property owner (email, phone number and address) so we/you can obtain a liability release from them.
- Is there a safe route to walk most if not all of the perimeter?
- Is it a reasonable size for the amount of time you want to survey for?
- Is the invasive plant species *Phragmites australis* present?

*It is important to avoid walking around wetlands with *Phragmites australis* because this can spread this very aggressive invasive plant. For pictures and a description that can help you identify this invasive, please see the Wetland Plants Species Guide included in your volunteer package.

If you do see invasive phragmites in any wetland or along a road side, we highly encourage you to report it so that conservation organizations can try to remove and manage it. You can report it on the EDDMaps Ontario app if you have it, or contact your volunteer coordinator for help reporting your observation. Also, if you are interested in invasive *Phragmites* control - consider checking out The Land Between's Phrag Fighters Community Science program!

CAUTION

There are dangers in working near wetlands.
Please participate at your own discretion



Recording and Submitting data

Volunteers should submit their data within 24-48 hours after their wetland survey. You can record your data on the paper data sheets provided, and later transcribe the data online through the Reporting Form on the Turtle Guardians website.

After your first survey, you will fill out an additional form to let us know what type of wetland you are surveying. There are lots of guidelines provided to you to determine what type of wetland you are monitoring. As with your data, you will fill out a paper data sheet to determine your wetland type, and then transcribe it onto our online reporting form when you get home.



Search Efforts and Consistency

It is important that your search efforts remain as consistent as possible throughout your time as a Wetland Watcher. You can help us ensure this by documenting your start and end times to the exact minute. We need to know how many turtles you are finding in a given amount of time so that we understand the density of turtle populations in a given area. Recording exact and detailed start and stop times also helps us to maintain accurate records of the data that volunteers collect for us, and ensures that we can use the data in the future.

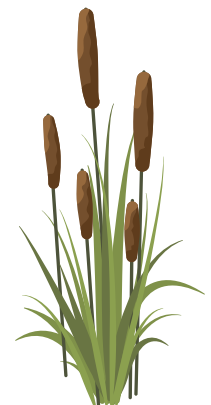
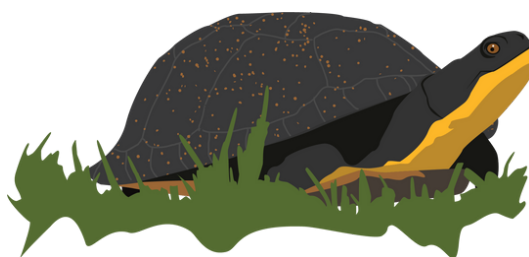
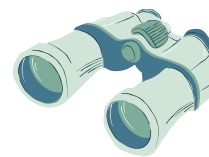
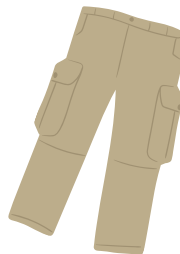
Recommended Materials to bring on a Wetland Watchers Survey

Personal Safety Items

- Sunscreen and sunhat
- Bug jacket
- Rubber boots or other waterproof closed toe shoes
- Long sleeves and pants to avoid insect and plant hazards
- Water bottle
- Snacks (optional)
- First Aid Kit (optional)
- Cell phone

Monitoring Supplies

- Turtle ID and Wetland ID sheets
- Wetland Watchers Guide (this document)
- Clipboard and pencil
- Paper data sheets
- Binoculars (if you have them)
- Smartphone with GPS app or Handheld GPS



Safety Considerations

Checking In: If monitoring alone, check in before and after your survey with someone you trust, and make sure to give them specific information about where you will be monitoring and how long you expect to be out. Bring a charged cell phone with you while monitoring, although be mindful that you may not have cell service in all locations. If monitoring with a partner ensure there is one charged cell phone and have the emergency contact information for your partner on hand.

Traversing around wetlands: Stay around the edges of the wetland, do not enter the wetland to collect observations. It is especially important not to walk on bogs or fens, or on any spongy mossy waterlogged ground (peat/sphagnum moss) in general. These moss mats are floating on water and it is possible to fall through them, though they may appear stable. While walking around the outskirts of a wetland scanning for wildlife, make sure to look where you are placing your feet. Carry monitoring supplies like your clipboard, sheets and binoculars in a small backpack while not using them to keep your hands free while walking.

Survey Protocol

1 First Survey - Getting to Know Your Wetland. On your first trip out to your wetland, please complete the Getting to Know Your Wetland Activity to determine what type of wetland you are monitoring. It is a good idea to have your Wetland Plant Species Guide on hand when you complete this activity to help identify plant species. When you get home, fill out the online Register Your Wetland form on the Turtle Guardian's website using the information you collected. Once you have completed this form, you can begin your wetland surveys.

2 Start your Survey. Make sure you have been assigned a unique wetland identification code before heading out on your first trip to your wetland. You will have received this code from your volunteer coordinator when you completed your training. You will need this code for your data sheet. If you have not received a code yet, please contact us.

Check the weather before heading out on a wetland survey. Ideal conditions for monitoring turtles are cooler sunny days in which they will come out to bask, but you can still see them in other conditions as well. Do not go out to monitor in inclement weather such as thunderstorms, or high winds.

Record your name, assigned unique wetland identification code, wetland type(s), date, weather conditions, and the *exact* time at which you are officially starting to monitoring the wetland on your data sheet.



3 Scan the wetland. Start walking around your wetland and looking for turtles. Select at least 3 points along the outer edge of the wetland that you can access and that provide good views of the wetland. At each of these points scan the water, shoreline and potential basking sites for turtles for at least five minutes. Be careful not to count the same turtle twice when changing vantage points. Take a picture of the wetland from all 3 points and record the GPS coordinates of the location you are standing in when taking the photo. Please try to use approximately the same spots for surveying each time you monitor your wetland.

When recording GPS coordinates, Please use the Decimal Degrees coordinate system, and record all numbers after the decimal point. You may need to change your GPS settings, as this is not always the default.

Decimal Degrees looks like this: **45.045958, -78.505775**

You can use your own GPS unit or app, or you can use the Google Maps App. Tap on a spot next to your location (not directly on the blue dot) and scroll down on the menu that pops up and you will see the coordinates listed. **If you need help with GPS coordinates, contact your volunteer coordinator.**

IMPORTANT NOTE: Please take GPS coordinates at your 3 wetland survey spots during your first survey, and send them to Turtle Guardians when you upload your data so that we have a location record for the wetland you are monitoring. Once we have this information, taking GPS coordinates of your turtle sightings is optional unless you change your survey locations, as they will all be located within the same wetland each time you report them.

4 Record your observations. When you see a turtle, use your binoculars (if you have them) to look for distinguishing features to identify its species. Observe its behaviour to determine what it is doing (swimming, basking, mating or nesting). Record the turtle species and activity in the observations section of your data sheet. Try to take photos of the turtles you observe to submit with your data. It can be hard to take good photos of turtles that are far away in a wetland, so try your best, but if it is not possible to get a photo, that is also fine.

If you are unable to identify the species, record the observation as an unknown turtle, and still describe its behaviour and habitat. Please reference the separate Turtles of TLB Species Guide document and the turtle behaviour descriptions at the end of this document for helpful information.

If you see other wildlife that you would like to record, add this to the non-turtle observations section of your data sheet, especially beavers and any beaver activity.



5 Finish Your Survey. When you are finished your survey, record your end time on your data sheet. Please input your data onto the online reporting form on the Turtle Guardians website when you get home, ideally within 24-48 hours after your survey.

Canoe/Kayak option- See WW Canoe/Kayak Guide

If there is enough open water in your wetland and a safe access point into the water, you can monitor your wetland from a canoe or kayak. This is an at your own risk option, and we recommend having a buddy with you or close by on shore if using this method for safety reasons. **If you would like to learn more about conducting your wetland watchers survey by canoe or kayak, please contact your volunteer coordinator for additional safety guidelines.**

Turtle Behaviour Descriptions

The descriptions below are very basic, and are not the only behaviours that turtles will exhibit. However, these are behaviours that will be easy to observe and identify from a distance with binoculars.

Swimming

The turtle is moving through the water. You might only see its head and neck sticking out of the water, although the top of its shell might also be visible above water. Picture on the right shows a painted turtle swimming.



Basking

The turtle is resting stationary in the sun, often on a log or rock. The picture to the right shows Painted Turtles basking on a log.



Mating

This can look like splashing with two turtles struggling near the surface of the water. The male mounts the female with his plastron (belly shell) pressed against her top shell, his claws tightly gripping the edges of her carapace, and his tail wrapped around hers. This can happen below the surface and might be hard to detect. The picture on the right shows two Snapping Turtles mating.



Nesting

You might see a turtle nesting along the shores of a wetland or on the road shoulder adjacent to a wetland. The turtle will look like she is lying on the ground and may be slowly rocking from side to side or back and forth. There may be a pile of disturbed soil behind the turtle. The picture to the right shows a nesting Blanding's Turtle.



Wetland Typing Decision Tree

