

Saving Graces

I saw another disaster the other day. On Route 117 in Lincoln, just between Farrar Pond and Mount Misery, an innocent painted turtle ventured out onto the road, intent on crossing. Ahead of me, there was a steady stream of oncoming traffic; behind me, an impatient driver in a white Camaro, riding my tail. I saw tragedy in the making and pulled over to rescue the turtle, but the Camaro swerved around me and sped on. He caught the side of the shell and spun the turtle into the opposite lane. The oncoming traffic flattened it.

It was rush hour. People had to get home.

This is the fate of turtles at this time of year. Each spring, starting in April, they venture from ponds where they have spent the winter to lay their eggs in dry, upland soils, often crossing back roads and highways in the process. Turtles have enough problems in late twentieth-century New England even without roads. Six of the dozen formerly common species have declined significantly in number, having fallen victim to loss of wetlands, pollution, pesticides—not to mention indifferent, even vindictive, drivers in high-speed cars. It is not a good age for turtles.

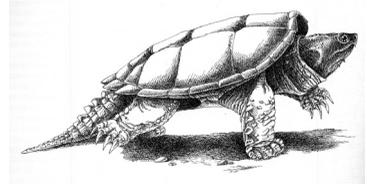
It is not a good age for people. The Carter Center is tracking the course of no fewer than thirty wars and over one hundred serious conflicts. Industrial chemicals are eroding the very structure of the earth's sheltering atmosphere; air pollution is altering the world climate; there are too many people on earth; what food there is is not being distributed equitably; and now the whole course of civilization is conspiring to undo a class of animal that has endured on the planet since the age of the dinosaurs.

In the face of it all, the least one can do is help turtles cross roads.

Here in eastern New England, where there are a lot of ponds and wetlands and, in certain areas, a healthy local population of turtles, that is no small task. On certain days in late May I sometimes have to stop two or three times. The setting is always the same. Ahead on the road, when you are least expecting it, you see a thing very like a rock. Come closer and you will see the shell, the head extended, those beady, seemingly intelligent eyes cautiously regarding the passing cars. Sometimes they make a dash for it (or as much of a dash as a turtle is capable of). Sometimes they

forge on in the face of certain dissolution. Rarely have I seen one turn back.

I pull over and wave off traffic. Around me the indifferent drivers wail by, rushing to God knows where. Some swerve away perilously, some brake, some even pull over, but most stream past without



altering their course. Too often I am too late and have to witness the violence of the roads, the dreaded impact, the spin of the shell, perhaps a second strike. Sometimes, though, I am able to carry the potential victim across and set it on course.

My favorites are the big snappers, the ones who detest rescue. I love to see them stand off cars, glaring. I love the way they rise up, hissing and lunging when you come near. I like the way they attempt to kill you even when you've got them by the tail and they must know, or believe at least, that their end has come.

I have learned a great deal in the years of turtle salvage. I have learned that it is fruitless to turn them back from their destinations. They will simply try again after you leave. I have also learned that suburban women in high heels and jewelry are not necessarily terrified of huge snapping turtles. I once came across a group of properly attired ladies on a back road in Carlisle wheeling an immense, gape-jawed snapper to safety in a wheelbarrow. I have learned that at least 50 percent of American drivers are not watching the road. I have seen them run over turtles without pause. I have learned never to prejudge fast drivers in late-model muscle cars.

Once, on a narrow back road, I was tailgated by such a car for miles. I could see the driver in the rear-view mirror—he was hunched over the wheel, his head tilted to one side impatiently, wraparound dark glasses, wide, angry mustache. And then ahead, around a sharp curve, too late to stop short because of the tailgater, I saw a turtle, a spotted, a once-common species. I swerved past and pulled over, certain that the speeder would strike, probably out of spite. I heard a squeal of brakes, and before I could even get out of the car he was there, cradling the turtle in his hands. He carried it across the road and let it go in a marsh. "Spotted turtle," he said to me when I arrived on the scene. "These are rare. We've got to take care of these guys."

May/June 1993