

**ONTARIO TURTLE**  
CONSERVATION CENTRE

*Home of the Kawartha Turtle Trauma Centre*



*2019 ANNUAL REPORT*



*Ontario Turtle Conservation Centre's mission is to protect and conserve  
Ontario's native turtles and their habitat*

*Our goals:*

*Turtle Conservation and Education Leadership*

*International Scientific Recognition*

*Organizational Excellence*



## *A Message from our Executive and Medical Director*

2019 presented some tremendous opportunities and successes, as well as some significant challenges. With the continued increase in public awareness, in part due to OTCC's expanding education programming, our admission numbers continued to grow. This does not mean that more turtles are being injured and killed on roads, but that more are being saved! From these admissions we were able to harvest over 6,000 eggs! The greatly increased admission number stretched our resources beyond capacity and made it clear that we would need additional space and staffing to continue to support the growing need. See "A New Home For OTCC" on page 9 for details on our 2-Phase plan to solve our space challenge.

In 2019, we worked on establishing funds to ensure increased hospital staffing during our summer months. While we did have additional part-time veterinary assistance during 2019, we realize that more will be required. We have also been successful in securing funding for additional hot-line hours, and veterinary technician hours. Fundraising is an ongoing challenge, but we work hard at it, and it does pay off!

Our fundraising goal in 2019 was not only to accomplish the above, but to strategically increase and diversify our funding. Thanks to our supporters, our funding from donations increased by \$100,000 over 2018 levels. All of our programs continue to grow in a well balanced, and strategic manner. Our research programs have been adding to scientific knowledge and are helping projects globally. For example, our studies on Ranavirus in Ontario's turtles have been ground-breaking and are the first of their kind in Canada. We have published two scientific papers on this, and continue to work to further understand the biology of this virus, so we can use this knowledge towards not only turtle conservation, but that of all ectotherms. Our hatchling program grows each year, and our field studies are continuing to show that this is indeed a viable conservation strategy. In 2020, we will be heading into our ninth year of study, and we are showing that these released young turtles are adding to the turtle population. We continue to learn a lot about the best practices that ensure their "success."

Our partnerships and collaborations continue to expand and grow, and increase our sphere of influence. I was honoured to be invited to become a member of the International Union on the Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Conservation Group (TFTCG). I was delighted to be invited to be a plenary speaker at the Desert Tortoise Council in the US, and am very excited to have been invited to be part of a conservation initiative to help the critically endangered Pancake Tortoise, in Africa.

From humble but strong beginnings, our work is forever expanding its influence in the area of turtle conservation. While our committed staff team is lean in numbers, it is strong in determination and dedication.

Thank you to all of our members and supporters for your outstanding support throughout 2019. With the new challenge of COVID-19 upon us all, we wish all of you health and safety during these unprecedented times.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Sue Carstairs".

Dr. Sue Carstairs  
Executive and Medical Director



"Andrea," OTCC's Education Ambassador for the Blanding's Turtle Species with a friend  
Photo Credit: Wendy Baggs

# HOSPITAL

The increased level of demand experienced at the Trauma Centre in 2018 continued into the 2019 season with 1498 turtles admitted, far exceeding the number admitted in 2018, and triple the number experienced just three years ago in 2016. In all, over 1920 rehabilitated turtles and hatchlings were released back into their source wetlands across Ontario last year.

Throughout the year, we continued to add to the wealth of data that we collect through our work. The data is forwarded to government agencies

1498 Turtles Admitted to the Trauma Centre

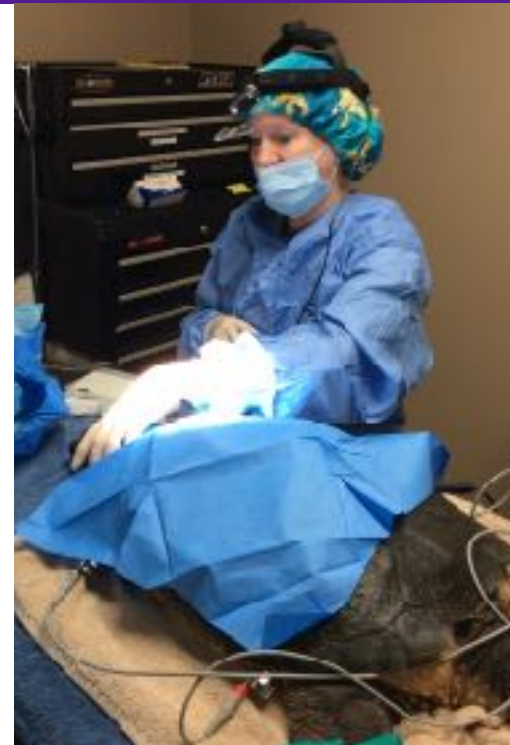
1920 Turtles Released Back to Source Wetlands Across Ontario

and partner organizations to inform future road mortality mitigation strategies such as eco-passages and road signage. It also directly affects conservation projects aiming to replace turtle populations lost through road mortality. We also continued to microchip all turtles

treated by OTCC prior to release back into their source wetland, to increase our knowledge on hotspots on our roadways, the movement of various species, and their habitat range and requirements. The identification of Ranavirus and Herpesvirus in Ontario's turtles in 2018 added disease surveillance to our on-going work in 2019, as we continued to screen turtles received at OTCC from across the province. Our work to date has completely revised the understanding of Ranavirus in Ontario's turtles. Our studies will continue into the next year as we endeavour to learn whether infected carriers can clear the infection, and whether they progress to show clinical signs. This information is crucial for organizations such as OTCC that work in the field of rehabilitation.

OTCC shared its wealth of knowledge with the science and conservation community through the following scientific publications completed in 2019: 1) "Evidence for low prevalence of ranaviruses in Ontario, Canada's freshwater turtles." Carstairs,

PeerJ, 2019; 2) "High prevalence of subclinical frog virus 3 infection in freshwater turtles of Ontario, Canada." Carstairs, Kyle and Torres Vilaca, *Virology*, 2020 (submitted 2019); 3) "Population reinforcement accelerates subadult recruitment rates in an endangered freshwater turtle." Carstairs et al, *Animal Conservation*, 2019; and 4) "Road avoidance and its energetic consequences for reptiles." Paterson et al, *Ecology and Evolution*. 2019.



# HATCHLING AND HEAD-START PROGRAM

OTCC's Hatchling Program ensures that the eggs from injured female turtles admitted to the trauma centre are also saved, and the resultant hatchlings are returned to their mother's source wetland ranges. Head-started juvenile turtles from the 2018 season were released back to their wetland homes throughout the spring and summer months of 2019.

The release of hatchlings helps to mitigate the reproductive impact of injured females, while also replenishing declining



1000 Hatchlings Released to Replenish Declining Populations

1000 Hatchlings Head-started for Return to Wild in 2020

populations. In the summer of 2019, 1000 hatchlings were returned to the wild as a result of this program. A further 1000 hatchlings overwintered at OTCC, to give them a head-start when they will be returned to the wild the following spring and summer. A sub-set of Blanding's turtle hatchlings are head-started for additional time, and

are released and tracked through our Field Research Project. Our on-going research has confirmed that head-starting the hatchlings decreases their risk of predation, and significantly increases their chance of survival.



Photo Credit: Wendy Baagds

# CONSERVATION RESEARCH AND FIELD STUDIES

2019 saw the completion of the eighth season of our field work to track our head-started Blanding's turtles against a group of comparable wild "control" juveniles, in order to study the effectiveness of head-starting as a conservation strategy. Throughout the course of the season, the field team tracked and surveyed 119 head-started and wild individuals in order to gain valuable data on the turtle populations at the field location. Data collected on each turtle includes shell measurements, weight, habitat description, and photos. Each turtle was then given a unique notch number so that it can be recognized in future



## Data on 119 Turtles Collected at Field Site

years. That same notch will be present on the turtle for years, so after the initial capture, turtle notch numbers are read from the shell to identify the turtle. As is the case each year, the field research staff kept an on-going journal of their activities from this year's field season, excerpts of which were posted in the form of a blog on OTCC's website. Visit <https://ontarioturtle.ca/news/> for tales from the field, compiled by our field technicians.



# EDUCATION AND OUTREACH



Above: 1st Hasting Scouts enjoy a workshop at OTCC's Education Centre in June 2019. Photo Credit: Karen Baker

Throughout 2019, our Education and Outreach program continued to increase public knowledge and involvement in turtle and wetland conservation. 10,000 people of all ages and backgrounds attended

100% of participants inspired to take action

10,000 participants attended in-depth presentations on turtle conservation

OTCC's in-depth, hands-on workshops, including 3,500 students and 895 youth. 168 sessions were presented at the OTCC education centre, or at outreach locations such as schools, camps, seniors' residences, community centres, and festivals. Participants were provided with tangible ways to become involved in turtle and wetland conservation,

and 100% of participants indicated that they were inspired to take action. After years of hearing of the great actions taken by our supporters, we wanted to find out more details on those specific actions that people have taken to conserve at-risk turtles and their wetland ecosystems. This information will inform program development and help identify hot-spots on our roads. A survey was developed and implemented on the OTCC website (<https://ontarioturtle.ca/get-involved/report-your-conservation-actions/>). Since its launch in the summer of 2019, 85% of respondents have responded that their actions were a result of OTCC's education and communications programming.



Right: Residents of Delmanor Glen Abbey enjoyed meeting our education ambassador turtles in July 2019. Photo Credit: Monique Kuhn.

# SPECIAL EVENTS



## First Responders Workshop

We continued to build on our work as a teaching and referral hospital in 2019. In March, OTCC held another special technical workshop to train and update first responders working at Wildlife Rehabilitation Centres and Veterinary Clinics across the province.

## Turtle Twilight

Turtle Twilight was held in July, in OTCC's outdoor education centre. It was a lovely evening that included a silent auction, guided tours of the hospital, entertainment, great food and drinks, and an opportunity to meet our turtle mascot.



## Hatchling Releases

Each year, OTCC invites a number of guests to be involved in at least one of our hatchling releases. In 2019, Rod Phillips, previously Ontario Minister of the Environment, Conservation and Parks, Bob Chapman, Ward 3 Regional and City Councillor for Oshawa, and Chris Darling of Central Lake Ontario Conservation Authority, joined Colin Cassin, OTCC board member, with his daughter Ellie, to release some snapping turtle hatchlings (left).

Another hatchling release event was held in June, 2019. In 2018, a female snapping turtle was brought to OTCC and released later in the fall after healing from her injuries. Her hatchlings spent the winter at OTCC and were released into the mother's home wetland in Aurora. Pictured at right, L-R, are Sue Carstairs, MPP Michael Parsa, MPP Andrea Khanjin, and Pippette and Wendy (Save the Henderson Forest), who found the injured mother. Board Member Colin Cassin, also attended.





# A NEW HOME FOR OTCC

Work began this year on an ambitious two-phase plan to re-locate the headquarters of our turtle hospital and education centre currently located in Selwyn, Ontario to a 42.5 hectare property on Television Road in Peterborough, 10 minutes away from our current location. The project has been made possible through the generosity of Mary Young and Gerry Young, current owners of the property on Television Road. The new location will provide much needed space for our hospital and hatchling facility, and will enable us to sustainably meet demands at the steadily increasing level of admissions that we have been experiencing the past three years. The landowners have leased the buildings to us at no charge to begin renovations, and we began the process to finalize an agreement for use of the property beyond the years of the lease.

The project consists of two phases::

Phase 1: Renovation of existing buildings (1800 and 1300 sq. ft) to increase capacity while maintaining our presence at our current location.

Phase 2: Construction of a purpose-built facility to replace our current location, and increase scope and impact.

The work to renovate the first building began in the fall of 2019 with the installation of a new furnace and electrical systems. Thanks to Architect Adam Chapman for donating the architectural drawings. We are also grateful to Herb Lang Well Drilling Ltd. for donating the sourcing of a new well. In parallel to continuing the renovations in 2020, we will be launching a capital campaign to raise funds for a new purpose-built facility that will enable us to move all our operations to this site including the hospital,



rehabilitation and hatchling facility, education centre, and offices. This new facility will provide an excellent showcase for the largest dedicated turtle hospital in Canada. Our new location will lay the groundwork for OTCC to grow programs, increase attendance, and diversify revenues, which in turn will enable us to increase conservation impact.

*Photo left: Lease signing day L-R, Executive and Medical Director Sue Carstairs, Landowners Mary Young and Gerry Young and Board Member Colin Cassin*



*Above: Renovations were started on the buildings to the left and right*

*Our sincere gratitude to Mary Young and Gerry Young for use of their extraordinary property to house OTCC's new Hospital, Hatchling Facility and Education Centre*

## Our Volunteers

### In Appreciation

**A special thank you to our many volunteers who generously offered their time and expertise. In 2019, we involved over 800 volunteers in the work of OTCC, who collectively donated over 8000 hours of time. Without this incredible contribution from our dedicated volunteers, the accomplishments of the past year would not have been possible. We would also like to thank the many individuals, businesses and organizations that made generous donations of equipment and supplies, or held fundraising events on our behalf.**

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**Thank you to the 664 Turtle Taxi Drivers who drove injured turtles to the Trauma Centre from across the province.**

### In-Kind Donations

Thank you to Herb Lang Well Drilling Ltd. for sourcing the well at our new location; Adam Chapman for donation of Architectural Drawings; the Riverview Park and Zoo for the donation of turtle supplies; Linda Huffman for the donation of turtle and office supplies; Wendy Baggs, for the donation of turtle crossing signs for the gift shop; Jory Mullen for gift shop donations, magnets and bookmarks; Renegade Apparel for donation of signs for the golf tournament; and Face It! by Christy Smith for face painting at our open house.

# OUR SUPPORTERS

OTCC's work is made possible through the contributions of individual donors, foundations, governments, corporate partners and organizations. We are deeply grateful for your generosity.

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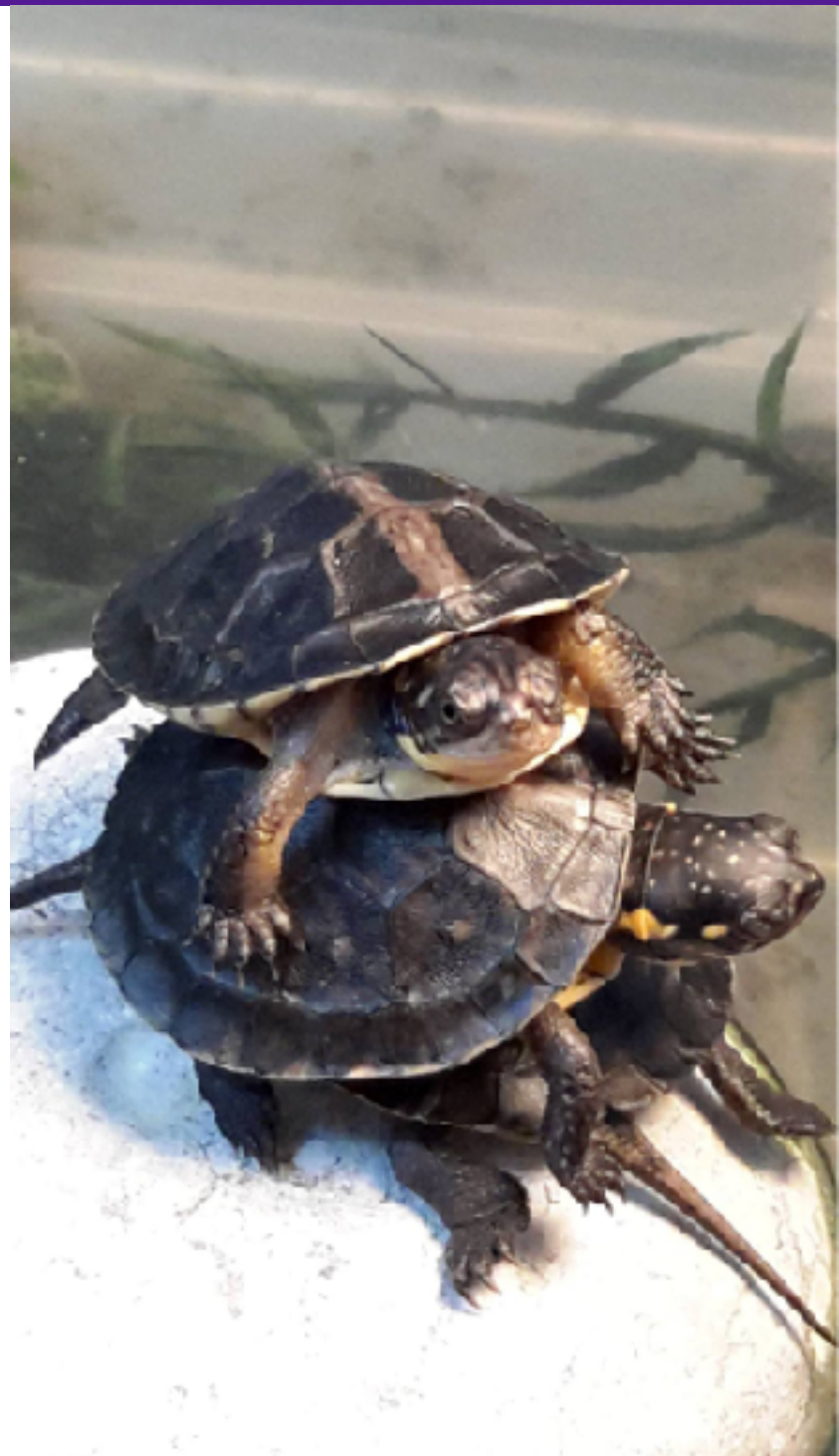
Office Administrator

\* to Nov 2019

\*\* from Nov 2019

\*\*\* to Aug 2019

\*\*\*\* from Sept 2019



## *Contract and Short-term Staff*

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***The Ontario Turtle Conservation Centre is Canada's leading turtle rehabilitation and conservation centre. The mandate of the OTCC is to protect and conserve Ontario's at-risk freshwater turtles and their wetland habitats.***




**ONTARIO TURTLE CONSERVATION CENTRE**  
Home of the Kawartha Turtle Trauma Centre


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