

Researcher studying state of three turtle species in islands

By KIM LUNMAN
Staff Writer

MALLORYTOWN LANDING — Marie-Andrée Carrière spends her summer days on the St. Lawrence River searching for smelly bottom dwellers most people would happily go out of their way to avoid.

The 27-year-old zoologist is a reptile researcher working with Parks Canada at Mallorytown Landing studying stinkpot turtles in the Thousand Islands.

The black turtles keep a low profile burrowed in the mud and emit a musky skunk-like odour to defend themselves against predators and nosy humans. Some even bite.

"They're the trolls of the river," said Carrière, a University of Ottawa researcher who has studied three threatened species of turtles in the Thousand Islands region, including the stinkpot, Blanding's and map turtles for the past three years. Painted turtles and snapping turtles are also indigenous to the area but not considered threatened species.

She is continuing her work at St. Lawrence Islands National Park this year, trapping and tracking the turtles so federal government researchers can see whether all three species are increasing, decreasing, or remaining stable in at the area.

Her work is becoming increasingly known to local residents. Carrière spends seven days a week cruising in a boat on the river between Mallorytown, Rockport and Grenadier Island for her reptilian subjects, sometimes



KIM LUNMAN/THE RECORDER AND TIMES

Marie-Andrée Carrière holds up a Blanding's turtle that has a transmitter attached.

snorkelling to get them.

"Turtle girl, I get a lot," said Carrière with a laugh. "Everybody's really enthusiastic and want to help out."

Carrière, who studied painted turtles in Algonquin Park for her undergraduate degree in zoology

at the University of Guelph, finds her hard-shelled subjects fascinating to study.

"Reptiles are often an overlooked group in conservation," she said. "People typically look at the more fuzzy animals."

Perhaps that explains why there

have only been a handful of scientific studies on stinkpot turtles, the smallest turtle species in Ontario, growing to only 13 centimetres.

The local study should shed some more light on the species and other threatened turtle populations in the area, said Jeff Leggo, St.

Lawrence Islands National Park's resource conservation manager.

"According to the federal Species At Risk Act, we are accountable for these turtles," said Leggo. "The challenge is that our turtles spend an awful lot of time outside park boundaries and we have little control over risks outside the park."

The park will continue to communicate with residents and visitors about the importance of watching the turtles on the road and protecting turtle habitat, he said.

Researchers have attached transmitters to 30 map turtles, 20 stinkpot turtles and six Blanding's turtles to monitor their movements. Some of the turtles can live for up to 75 years, making long-term studies challenging.

"We're trying to see how they move and how they use the river and nest in their habitat," said Carrière.

Habitat loss is a big concern as wetlands along the Thousand Islands Parkway continue to give way to development along the river.

Carrière has found that home ranges for the map turtles averaged 2.5 kilometres, though some use an area of nearly 12 kilometres. The turtle studies conducted in 2005 and 2006 tracking map turtles found that an estimated 600 map turtles live in the Grenadier-Tar Island area.

She said contrary to popular belief, turtles are not slow, especially if you try to catch them under water. "They'll out-swim me any day."