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Turtle Power!

JANUARY 07TH 2015 BY DEE LOFLIN

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Missouri - As winter sets in, some of our wildlife, like turtles, seem to disappear. According to Bruce Henry, a natural history biologist with the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC), turtles are still here, they just have ways of hiding away to stay safe from the elements.

Instead of hibernating, cold-blooded turtles slow their metabolic processes down tremendously when temperatures drop, he said.

“They’re in a dormant, inactive state,” he said.

When temps drop they seek out environments that will provide the most stable temperature to wait out the winter months. Turtles have to save energy in order to survive the winter, so if they have to endure fast temperature changes, it costs them some of their fat stores, which puts them in danger.

“For example, a common snapper may descend to a deep submerged log pile in a pond or creek and curl up and wait out the winter with little movement, if any,” Henry said, adding that even the turtle’s respiration and heart beat rates will decrease dramatically to help save energy.

“Instead of breathing, aquatic turtles can absorb oxygen from the water through their skin,” he said.

Box turtles dig burrows and red eared sliders burrow into mud at the bottom of wetlands for protection from extreme winter temperatures. They won't eat as much food throughout the winter either since eating will increase their metabolic rate.

“Slow and steady is the name of the game for a turtle to survive the winter,” Henry said.

Henry said people can help turtles by providing good places for them to hide. They need soil to burrow in the forests, plants to take shelter in in the wetlands, and overall healthy habitat and waters where they can seek refuge from the cold.

“Like us, turtles need a place to take shelter from the cold,” he said. “That shelter can be a rotted-out log on the south slope of an Ozark woods or a downed cypress treetop in a bootheel slough.”

“Turtles and other wildlife are tremendously stressed when temperatures decline to the levels we experience in Missouri,” he said. “The main thing people can do during the winter months make sure they don't disturb habitat unnecessarily when weather conditions are bad.”

For example, a pond drained in the winter may freeze many of the aquatic species that may have been able to move to nearby wetlands had the temperatures been higher.

“Wildlife can't survive the disturbances or destruction of habitat while they struggle against adverse weather conditions,” he said.

To find more information on winter wildlife and what you can do to help them, go online to mdc.mo.gov.

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