Northern Diamondback Terrapin survey underway through September

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Since the end of May, a group of dedicated volunteers has been combing the beaches at NAS Patuxent River trying to learn and document what they can about the installation’s Northern Diamondback Terrapin population and their nesting habitat.

Pax River’s open white sandy beaches, dunes and maritime forest provide the terrapins an ideal environment — one that is becoming sparser throughout the state. The species, once plentiful, now struggles to survive not only due to loss of nesting beach habitat and water quality degradation, but increased mortalities from boat collisions, road mortality, and unintentional drowning in crab cages.

“Because terrapin studies in Maryland show the species is in trouble, we want to do what we can with our habitat,” said Jackie Smith, natural resources specialist with the Pax River Environmental Division, who is overseeing the program. “Aside from some material cost and the minimal cost of having a Student Conservation Association (SCA) volunteer to conduct some surveys and manage the project, the bulk of the field work is done by local volunteers who’ve become passionate about terrapin conservation.”

Seeking the data, protecting the nests

Seventeen dedicated volunteers — most current or retired Pax personnel — completed the required training and scour the beaches twice each day searching for subtle signs of nesting, like tracks in the sand or disturbances such as churned up sand.

“When a nest is found, we uncover, weigh and measure the eggs, replace them, re-cover, and then place a predator exclusion device over the top [to protect the nest],” explained Rebecca Stump, the SCA intern who has headed the terrapin survey onboard Pax River for the past four years. “When hatchlings begin to emerge 50 to 80 days later, we weigh and measure each hatchling and then release them into the marsh or surrounding forest. By carrying them from nest to release site, no scent trail is left for predators to follow the hatchlings.”

This year has shown a huge increase in predator activity and Stump has a theory as to why that might be.

“There is three times as much nest carnage this year as in all previous seven years [since the survey began in 2013],” Stump noted. “Predators, which include raccoon, skunk, fox, and possibly coyote, are active during the day and seem to have learned that human smell is linked to the presence of eggs. I can walk through an area, stop along the way to dig in potential nesting spots, and then come back through an hour later and all of the spots where I had dug are now violently dug up. Each volunteer shift is a race to beat the predators to the undiscovered fresh nests. To date, we have protected 88 nests [this year].”

Vital to the work being done, is the cooperation afforded the survey by Pax River’s Air Operations division.

“They’ll close down a helicopter landing area by switching to an alternate site for four months,” Smith said. “This allows us to cage and protect those nests with materials that would otherwise be FOD, or foreign object debris, and be a hazard to landing. It also allows us to safely work with the nests in that [landing] area.”

Northern Diamondback Terrapins, North America’s only estuarine turtle, are about the size of a quarter when they emerge as hatchlings. Terrapins have a low egg-to-hatching survival rate, as nests often fall prey to predators.

Safety: first restrictions apply

River’s Edge is once again serving lunch 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Monday-Friday, and patrons have the option of eating in, sitting outside on the patio overlooking the Patuxent River, or picking up their food for take-out.

Of course, with COVID-19 guidelines in mind, a few changes have been implemented.

“There is no buffet at the current time, but there will be a daily “blue plate special” offered along with the River’s Edge menu,” explained Melissa Daugherty, River’s Edge manager. “Seating has been adjusted to less than 50% capacity with tables spaced 6-feet apart; and we’re limiting the number of patrons that can gather at the cashier area, which will accept cashless transactions only.”

Other restrictions in place include all guests wearing face coverings when entering or exiting the facility and using the restroom; all staff — who are temperature checked upon arrival — wearing masks and gloves at all times; disposable one-time-use paper menus; condiments upon request in single serve packets; and enhanced daily cleaning and sanitation of all areas.

“Also, all foodservice employees are required to have an updated sanitation class certificate,” Daugherty added. “The class is taught by the Preventive Medicine team at Naval Health Clinic Patuxent River and it covers sanitation, food-borne illness, keeping food at safe temperatures, the proper storage of food, etc. The main point is sanitation.”

Customers should follow the CDC recommended guidelines for physical distancing even when seated at a table, but can opt instead to call ahead at 301-342-3656, or use the Dine on the Go online service at www.dineonthegopaxriver.com to place a takeout order for pick-up.

“River’s Edge does not offer delivery, but our Eddie’s Dine on the Go does,” Daugherty said.

With all events and conferences currently on hold, and with most installation personnel still teleworking, it has been a struggle for River’s Edge.

“We’ve been slow and we need to spread the word that we’ve reopened,” Daugherty said. “We’re doing our best to keep our staff and customers safe during these trying times.”