

Misplaced wood turtle to get lift back home

BY BILL COUTANT
STAFF WRITER

He was a stranger in a strange land until two day campers at Heritage Park in Farmington Hills discovered the wood turtle.

City Naturalist Joe Derek said at that point, he saw the trademark yellow-orange legs and underside of the turtle that is not native to this area, and knew enough to ask around.

"I thought it was a wood turtle," he said. "I verified that it was, and then called the DNR (Michigan Department of Natural Resources)."

That led him to Jim Harding, a specialist in herpetology at Michigan State University in East Lansing and an expert on wood turtles.

"I'm from the Detroit area, but I've been going up north for years," Harding said. "In fact, I

have a picture of me at 10 with a wood turtle."

The turtle has few natural predators and under normal conditions prospers near rivers. It travels extensively.

Because of its attractive coloring, with a yellow-orange underside and yellow markings on its shell, it is often caught by people, especially youngsters, who try to make it a pet.

"That's probably how this one got here," Derek said.

Harding said because of its popularity with people, the species is protected in Michigan.

"It's had a drastic decline in population," he said. "If it is left to its own environment, it does very well. But people take them, make them pets, and they don't last long."

And once removed from their environment, there is one less tur-



Going home:

This immature wood turtle, found at Heritage Park in Farmington Hills, will be taken back to the northern part of the state, where it was likely taken. The wood turtle, which ranges from the Midwest to the Maritime Provinces in Canada and south to northern Virginia, is a protected species in Michigan.

tle to breed.

The wood turtle, which will grow to 8 inches for females and 9 inches for males at maturity, are breeding at 25-30 years of age and can reach 70 years of age or more.

"They like to be near moving

water," Harding said. "But they're terrestrial during the summer."

And being on land, or along canoeing routes, they are often easy for people to catch and take

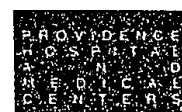
home. But when released, they can not survive in a southern Michigan environment.

"That's why Harding will be taking this turtle home."

"It will be an excuse for me to go back up north," he said.

Derek said he's happy to be able to restore the turtle, which hasn't reached maturity, back to its environment.

"It was good to be able to get it back to where it can survive," he said.



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