

Pelee Island Trip - 2016

Day 1

The first day was nothing short of a success, as soon as we got to the island we set up camp and had already found the first toad while doing so. Many people visit Pelee Island for birding as it is a key spot for migratory birds but we are out looking for herptiles as many of the species here are found nowhere else in Canada. After setting up camp we set out to see if we could find some snakes, by flipping only a few boards we found a plethora of garter snakes of all different sizes and colours. As it began to get dark we head out to the next herping spot to look for the small mouthed salamanders. Sure enough we found our first and sadly our only small mouthed salamander for the night, we did however find a bunch of black efts. Efts are the juvenile stage of eastern newts and although the ones on the mainland are red to orange the ones on Pelee Island are much darker in colour. Finally we finished the night with some terrestrial snails, a species only found here. As we were getting ready for bed we heard coyotes howl in the distance and in the middle of the night as I'm writing this something large just moved my tent.

Day 2

The morning of the second day was cold but I awoke at the crack of dawn to a symphony of bird calls. I went out to the camp washroom to get ready for the day and of course had to bring my camera where I was delighted to find about seven Turkey vultures gathered in a tree resting. Upon returning to the camp I found that everyone had woken up, I saw a scarlet tanager and soon we were ready for a day of herping. Our first spot for herping was on a road by some water, we were checking the rocky areas and under rocks for herps when Matt and Clinton had found a young Lake Erie water snake. Lake Erie water snakes are the rarest snakes in North America because of their tiny range of only a few islands and some surrounding area. After the snake we went to an area which had some small mouthed salamanders and many garter (two melanistic ones) and dekey's brown snakes (a lifer for me). The snakes were found under covers mainly made up of wooden boards with tiling that was stuck on using a super strong glue. Unfortunately as many of the tiles degraded the glue was left which many animals specifically the snakes became stuck to. Fortunately we were able to save a large number of these snakes and one spider from these glue traps and left the sticky tiles out in the sun so that the glue would dry up. In that same spot we found a baby snapping turtle which I of course had to take many photographs of. Even though I work with many baby snapping turtles at the Kawartha Turtle Trauma Centre, it is still very special to find a wild one. We then headed back to where we originally saw the small mouthed salamanders on the first day, not for the small mouths but for the frogs and water snakes. We spotted a larger number of green frogs, bull frogs and American roads but found no water snakes. We then found a melanistic garter snake with a regurgitated toad. We moved the log half of it was under to get a better look but was mortified to find that part of its body was completely flattened by the log. This led us to come to believe that it was squished by someone having stepped on the log prior, damaging the poor snake. The next place we checked had many turtles mainly midland painted turtles and two of the largest snappers I had ever seen in the wild. We also found another small mouthed salamander and another baby snapper. Finally the last spot we checked for the day was by the coast which was filled with juvenile Lake Erie water snakes and as we went further we found larger ones, one of which tagged me (bit me) causing large amounts of bleeding. Water snakes have an anticoagulant in their saliva which stops blood from scabbing over. We returned to camp only to find a bunch of grackles to be feeding on some of our leftover pizza.

Day 3

Last night was pouring rain and with the cold breeze and the lack of sunlight we didn't think we would see many reptiles so we decided to check out spots for salamanders. The first spot we checked out had a significant amount of garter snakes but as we headed deeper into the forest we found many salamanders. The salamanders we found in this area are small mouth/blue spotted polyploids. Polyploids in the genus *Ambystoma* are hybrids between two different species. These hybrids are born with two sets of chromosomes enabling them to create offspring identical to itself. The small mouthed salamanders in this area are known to have interbred with blue spotted salamanders creating these polyploids. In this area we also found many slugs which have a colouration and pattern that resembles the tail of a small mouthed salamander. It's believed that these slugs have adapted this camouflage in order to deter predators as *Ambystomas* are known to produce toxins when threatened. While we hiked the area known for polyploids we also came across some *Plasticine* salamanders which we noticed were being watched by a camera. According to an orange flag by the camera, this was put up as part of a study by none other than Trent University. The second place we checked out for salamanders also had large amounts of efts along with a young adult eastern salamander. We then found a beautiful Lake Erie water snake and got a photo or two but as I was about to take another my camera died so all other photos were taken by my iPod. In this spot we found more small mouthed salamanders than anywhere else, with 11 small mouthed salamanders under one log which is a FANTASTIC find. We later found more efts and headed back to camp for lunch and to charge my camera. Finally the third place we checked out was for snakes. As the sun was beginning to shine between the clouds we thought it would bring them out. As soon as we started, we found an American toad and later some garter snakes including a melanistic garter. We then headed back to camp and later to an overpriced restaurant where we got swindled.

Day 4

This morning the air was cold and the sky was cloudy which is not good for finding snakes. But as it got sunnier out towards noon we headed out to find the fox snake. Along with the very rare blue racer, the fox snake is the only snake on the island we have not yet seen. The first spot we checked was forested and by the water, there we found a Blanding's turtle which I of course had to get photos of. Next we headed towards an area filled with sunlight and exposed tree roots. Among the roots was the elusive fox snake. The fox snake is a species of rat snake native to not only the island but other areas of Ontario as well. On the way back to the car we found another fox snake as they all seem to come out with the sun. On the way to a wetland, we stopped on the road as there was a giant snapping turtle which we had to stop to take photos of, it even had its appendage out unfortunately. When at the second spot we spotted two eastern map turtles a species that is listed as extirpated on Pelee Island according to a study by CARCNET. Well we certainly proved that wrong though it is likely the turtles are transients from another island or even the mainland. We also spotted many midland painted turtles and yet another Blanding's turtle. Finally we headed back but not before stopping to take photos of a bald eagle that was eating its prey in a large field. A great last full day with three lifers; the fox snake, the Blanding's turtles and the map turtles which aren't even supposed to be here. Unfortunately tomorrow we have to head back home but not before we go herping a few more times.

Day 5

Today is the last day at Pelee Island and as I woke up it was just pissing rain so I packed up what I could from inside my tent and put the tent away as the rain died down. Afterwards the sun began to light up so we went road cruising in the hopes of seeing a blue racer. Blue racers are extremely rare on the island and unfortunately we did not see one. Because the racers here are so rare farmers tend to kill them out of fear of losing their land as a result of the endangered species. We then took the fairy back to the mainland and along the way back home, stopped at two places hoping to see some wildlife. The first stop was in the hopes of seeing the elusive spiny softshell turtle, unfortunately we did not see it though we did see some wood frogs and a red eft. Next was a spot we heard had endangered queen snakes and sure enough we found two by some rocks. The first one was a juvenile while the other was an adult who unfortunately was sick with blisters disease. Queen snakes are some of the most specialized snakes in Ontario as they feed exclusively on crayfish but not just ordinary crayfish but ones that have recently shed their exoskeleton making them all soft.

The Pelee island trip was an amazing experience with great people. I saw some great animal species both herp, bird and even mammal. I can't wait for my next adventure with such a great herping group!!!