

ment collection features some scenes including this view of Salem Harbor.

In Dunstable forest, make way for box turtles

3 wooded acres set aside as special habitat to help this rare species flourish

By John Laidler
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Dunstable's Pierce Town Forest is the site of an innovative new effort to increase the population of a rare species of turtle.

With the help of state funding, Zoo New England is partnering with Dunstable to develop a specialized habitat area for eastern box turtles on 3 acres of the 133-acre town-owned forest.

The zoo agency, which has an active conservation field program in addition to operating the Franklin Park and Stone zoos, was recently awarded \$11,289 by the State Department of Fish and Game to support the Dunstable initiative. The funds came through a grant program that helps private and municipal landowners conserve land to improve wildlife habitat.

“We are really excited about it,” Bryan Windmiller, Zoo New England director of field conservation, said of the initiative, which builds on existing efforts by the organization since 2017 to support box turtles in the Dunstable area.

Those efforts, similar to conservation work Zoo New England undertakes at other sites, involves installing metal screens to protect turtle nesting sites from predators, and enlisting volunteers to raise newly hatched turtles in their homes for a period of months, increasing the chances the young turtles will survive when returned to the



TOM MURRAY

This eastern box turtle already seemed right at home on 3 acres in Dunstable's Pierce Town Forest that will be developed as a specialized habitat for the species.

wild.

Windmiller said with the Dunstable project, and a similar one planned in Acton, his agency is starting to also help landowners manage habitats to make them suitable for rare turtles.

“We're thrilled we have a great partner in the town of Dunstable that very much wants to manage their town forest in a way that makes it a really great place for wildlife as well as recreation,” he said.

Alan Chaney, chair of Dunstable's Town Forest

Committee, said the town is happy to do its part to conserve the local box turtle population.

“If you value nature and you see how fascinated young and old folks are with wildlife, it seems a pretty sensible thing to preserve the flora and fauna in our area.”

Chaney said the project also furthers the town's goal of creating a varied habitat within its forest that includes “fields and meadows and all kinds of creatures. We try to protect a broad spectrum of the environment.”

A small land turtle with a high-domed shell, the Eastern box is a state-listed species of special concern in Massachusetts. Windmiller said there are scattered populations of the turtle around the state, but they are rare in Northeastern Massachusetts.

Zoo New England's involvement in Dunstable began after Julie Lisk, a member of its field conservation team, encountered a box turtle crossing a road in Dunstable in 2017.

Dunstable was not then an identified area for the species, but spurred by her encounter, Lisk was able to locate about 30 adult box turtles inhabiting a 700-acre area in Dunstable that includes the town forest and a state wildlife management area.

While there is no current estimate, Windmiller said the box turtle population has “almost certainly grown” since 2017. “We have released a combined 29 raised juveniles and the great majority of those are still alive.” The Zoo has been aided in its conservation efforts by Koda, a dog specially trained to track turtles in the wild.

TURTLES, Page B14



ZOO NEW ENGLAND

A view of the Dunstable's Pierce Town Forest site that's been cleared for eastern box turtles.

A haven for turtles in Dunstable

►TURTLES

Continued from Page B11

In spring 2020, Zoo New England learned Dunstable planned some timber cutting in the town forest. At the organization's behest, the town agreed 3 of the acres designated for harvesting would be clear-cut — making them suitable for box turtles, a plan that was followed when the harvesting was done last spring.

Box turtles prefer the kind of “scrubby field area” that has now been created, Windmiller said, noting that it is also suitable habitat for Eastern whippoorwills, a protected bird species found in the area. At his team's request, Dunstable also had its timber firm bulldoze one of the three acres to create the sandy ridges box turtles prefer for nesting.

Zoo New England will manage the site going forward, in-



TOM MURRAY

An eastern box turtle makes his way through some of the low brush that makes the Dunstable site an ideal habitat.

cluding removing some of the oak shoots to prevent reforestation of the site, and planting native shrubs, grasses, and wildflowers, including New England Blazing Star, a protected wildflower.

Reflecting on the venture, Windmiller joked, “I feel like I am involved in real estate development — but only for turtles.”

John Laidler can be reached at laidler@globe.com.