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Brake for wildlife!

By ARCHBOLD BIOLOGICAL STATION

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Box turtles and other turtles/tortoises should be held with two hands and carried across the road in the direction they were heading.

COURTESY PHOTO/ABBIE VALINE

VENUS — Highlands County, Florida is home to some amazing wildlife. Several species in this

region are found nowhere else in the world, and many are threatened or endangered.

Unfortunately, you can drive any road through Highlands County and be sure to see roadkill.

Mortality from vehicle strikes is a major cause of death for some species, including the state-threatened gopher tortoise. Animals aren't the only ones that suffer when animals are hit by vehicles. According to the U.S. Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration, approximately 4-10% of wildlife-vehicle collisions result in human injuries.

While roadkill is a problem that can never be fully solved, there are ways to reduce your chances of hitting an animal, helping you and preserving your neighborhood wildlife.

Reptiles and amphibians can be seen crossing roads fairly frequently, and Highlands County is home to many. In fact, 48 species of reptiles and 21 species of amphibians have been recorded at Archbold Biological Station alone. Freshwater turtles and gopher tortoises are usually easy to see on a road as they move about during the hotter parts of the day. If you see one on a road and can safely stop, pick it up with two hands on either side of the shell, towards the back, and place it well off the road in the direction it was headed. Never lift a turtle by the tail or a leg and be sure to sanitize your hands after touching any wild animal.

While tortoises and most of the turtles you will encounter are gentle, be extra careful around the softshell turtle and snapping turtles as they may bite if they feel threatened. If in doubt, simply remain in your vehicle and give the turtle space to cross on its own. Dustin Angell, Archbold's director of education, reminds us, "Some gopher tortoises at Archbold have been recorded as living for more than 60 years, so that tortoise you saw crossing the street may have been traveling back and forth on that same route for decades, possibly before that road was even laid down or became highly trafficked." He also emphasizes that anyone wishing to help an animal cross or move off the road only do so when it is safe.

Snakes are also more active during hotter parts of the day and may look like cracks, sticks, or other debris in the road. Archbold is home to 28 species of snakes, most of which are not a threat to humans, and all of which play vital roles in the ecosystem. However, some snake species are venomous, and others may bite when they feel threatened. As such, Archbold does not advise picking up snakes; instead, simply brake and give the snake time and space to finish crossing the road. Similarly, you may see alligators crossing roads, particularly during the dry season as they seek out new water sources or males seeking mates in the mating season. Never approach an alligator, rather give it room to cross the road by itself.

From armadillos to hogs, mammals are some of the more common roadkill here in Highlands County. Raccoons, opossums, armadillos, deer and feral hogs are all likely to be most active in those low-visibility driving times of early morning and late evening. Virginia opossums are one of the more prevalent road-killed mammals. Joe Guthrie, Archbold's Predator-Prey Program director, says that opossums "are a super valuable scavenger, cleaning up dead animals (hence why they are constantly standing around in roadways) and feeding on mice, rats and cockroaches, all of which help prevent the spread of pathogens. They also can consume as many as 4,000 ticks a week. We should at least try to keep from killing them with our cars."

Some local mammals at risk of roadkill are large species such as the Florida black bear (listed as threatened in the state) and the Florida panther, which is federally endangered. Both species require large amounts of land for habitat and to roam (home range of Florida black bear approximately 10-40 square miles and Florida panther approximately 275 square miles). Guthrie also notes: "We know auto accidents are a huge threat to the endangered Florida panther, for example, in most years collisions with vehicles claim >10% of the estimated population (120-230 panthers)."

Highlands County is a spectacular place for birding with more than 277 species reported (see www.ebird.org) and great birding locations including Highlands Hammock State Park, Lake Istokpoga, and Lake June-in-Winter State Park. The best strategy to employ when approaching a bird on the road, of any size, is to brake until you can be sure the bird is off road. One reason birds end up feeding in roadways is roadside litter and other roadkill. Avoiding littering and collecting litter, means fewer scavengers (mice, raccoons, etc.) are attracted. Moving roadkill well back off the road means species like vultures, owls, hawks and crows lured in do not become roadkill in turn.

Wildlife will always surprise you on the road, and for the sake of safety, the animal's well-being, and your vehicle it is prudent to have several avoidance strategies available. Carefully looking out on the road ahead of you allows you to see most animals and gives you time to brake or stop. Large animals such as deer or bear might cross the road quickly and unexpectedly, so it is wise to drive slowly at dawn and dusk when these animals are generally more active. Similarly, when driving in the dark or in fog make sure your stopping distance is within the area illuminated by your headlights; overdriving your headlights can create a blind 'crash area' in front of you. Drive particularly carefully in areas posted as wildlife crossings as these areas are known wildlife crossing locations with records of animal-vehicle collisions. Overall safer driving practices mean

we can help protect animals and ourselves.

Despite these efforts, animals may still be injured on roads. If you do come across a living animal that has been struck by a car, you can contact your local wildlife rehabilitation center. Archbold Biological Station is not a wildlife rehabilitation center and does not have the staff, facilities, or permits to care for injured animals. Instead, you should call a licensed wildlife rehabilitator such as the Audubon Center for Birds of Prey or visit the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission website to find a contact: myfwc.com/media/5423/licensedwildliferehabilitatorsbyregion.pdf.

If you cannot reach a licensed wildlife rehabilitator who can treat the type of animal you found, you can contact FWC's Southwest Regional Office for assistance at 863-648-3200. In the words of Joe Guthrie, "If we all slow down and raise our vigilance about animals in the road in these hotspots maybe we can reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions and make our own daily drive a little less hazardous." Highlands County boasts a breathtaking diversity of wildlife, and this is one way we can all help to conserve our natural heritage for generations to come.