

## Shelling out big bucks to protect turtles



A radio transmitter was installed on this box turtle in Sandwich to keep track of the threatened reptile at a construction site. *Krista Schinagl/Cape Cod Times*

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Liam Bevan spent the last two months playing a shell game.

Each morning before 7, the environmental inspector scoured a 3.5 mile stretch of Sandwich woods — from the Cape Cod Canal to Route 130 — making sure 30 eastern box turtles were out of harm's way.

"Turtles can't outrun a bulldozer," Bevan said. "Other animals might run away, but a turtle tends to duck its head and hope for the best."

Spectra Energy, the company installing a gas pipeline through those woods, couldn't take any chances that a turtle would find its way under the track of dozer. Like the piping plovers getting so much attention of late, eastern box turtles are federally protected and are on the threatened species list.

As part of its permit to install the pipeline, Spectra hired ENSR, an environmental engineering firm with an office in Sagamore Beach, for \$250,000 to protect the turtles. ENSR located the turtles, installed radio transmitters on their shells and had an inspector on hand to make sure the turtles steered clear of the bulldozers, backhoes and trucks used to expedite the project.

Along with the radio transmitters, a fence was installed in an area where the turtles like to nest, Bevan said.

Bevan's been there every morning for two months, but other inspectors have worked the site over the past year, he said.

Dogs were used to sniff out the turtles, Jane D'Arcy, a spokeswoman for ENSR, said.

The natural gas pipeline begins at the Mirant Canal Electric Generating Plant on the Cape Cod Canal and ends 3.5 miles south at an existing gas metering site on Route 130. The pipeline will increase the supply of natural gas to Cape residents, D'Arcy said.

Yesterday, Bevan was able to find one of the turtles — known on his chart as BT15 — within seconds. Using an antenna that looks like it was ripped off a 1960s roof, Bevan tracked the colorful orange-and-black male box turtle using its very own

frequency. The turtle, about 20 years old, lumbered through the grass and lurched over a log before taking his tiny 7-inch frame back into the woods. Had he not gone there on his own, Bevan would have picked him up and walked him about 100 feet into the forest.

Construction has wrapped up on the pipeline itself, but crews are in the process of planting grass and spreading mulch. So BT15 and his friends still require Bevan's protection.

"Right after that's done, we're going to round them up and take their transmitters off," Bevan said. "We'll be done by the end of the week."

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## **BOX TURTLE FACTS**

**Description:** Box turtles have a hinged belly plate that allows the animal to close its shell almost completely. They have a high-domed, rounded shell with variable markings. The toes are only slightly webbed.

**Environment:** Temperature determines activity rate. In the heat of the summer, box turtles restrict their activity to mornings and after a rainfall.

**Habits:** In the northern regions, box turtles go into hibernation in October or November, but farther south they remain active later in the year. To hibernate, they burrow as far as two-feet deep into loose earth, mud, stream bottoms, old stump holes or mammal burrows. They usually emerge from hibernation in April.

**Home range:** These turtles usually have a home range with a diameter of 750 feet or less in which they normally stay.

Occasionally, for unknown reasons, they journey out from their home range. Home ranges of different individuals overlap frequently. The turtles are often found together and rarely show antagonism toward each other.

**Source:** Smithsonian National Zoological Park.

<http://nationalzoo.si.edu/Animals/ReptilesAmphibians/Facts/FactSheets/Easternboxturtle.cfm>