

## A girl named Johnny

*A rescued box turtle from the Cape has arrived to work with Max the dog to help protect her species.*

By **Barry Stringfellow** - May 21, 2014



*Johnny Sue, a rehabilitated box turtle from the Cape, is now an Island resident, helping to save her species. — Photo by Ralph Stewart*

Johnny took off like a shot when she was first released from her carrier in a field behind the Sheriffs Meadow Foundation (SMF) offices at the Wakeman Center off Lambert's Cove Road in Vineyard Haven. As close to a shot as a box turtle can move.

"Keep your eye on her. I would not want to do a blind search with Max yet," said Karen Ogden, whose golden retriever, Max, was waiting in her truck for his first turtle detecting field test.

Ms. Ogden, an experienced dog trainer specializing in search and rescue dogs, is volunteering her time and her considerable expertise to take part in an innovative turtle detection program that will help preserve the eastern box turtle population on Martha's Vineyard. The program is the brainchild of Martha's Vineyard Land Bank ecologist Julie Russell and Sheriffs Meadow director of stewardship Kristen Fauteux.

"We have a problem with trying to mow some of our woodlands like Waskosim's, a field surrounded by woods, which is perfect box turtle habitat," Ms. Russell said. "But we had to find a way to keep up with our in-season mowing. We have oaks, cherries, sumac that are taking over and we're losing our field. The turtles require that habitat. That's where they lay their eggs."

"Here on the Island turtles tend to be older because there's low road mortality," Ms. Fauteux said. "There are box turtles walking around that are over 100 years old. The idea that you might run one over with a tractor is not acceptable."

Ms. Russell and Ms. Fauteux have a long-standing collaborative relationship; they often finish each other's sentences.

"We tried goats and sheep, but they don't eat all the vegetation we need to clear," Ms. Russell said. "We felt like there had to be a better way."

Inspiration struck after Ms. Russell saw a demonstration of a turtle detecting dog at a conference. "We called all the vets on the Island and asked about trainers," Ms. Fauteux said. "Karen has a lot of experience training rescue dogs. She was the obvious choice. Once she jumped on board the project got going.

"The fact that Karen is here is amazing. Anyone else would have had to travel to another state to find someone with her expertise."

"I started as a canine search and rescue handler in 1992," Ms. Ogden said. "We started training dogs for scent to find a specific person, then expanded to wilderness scent, and eventually human remains detection."

Ms. Ogden's search and rescue dog, Ryan, was one of the first in the state to be certified for the grim task of cadaver work. This is the first time Ms. Ogden has trained a dog to sniff out box turtles, but she was confident it would work. "There are dogs trained to find Mojave Desert tortoises, endangered salamanders, even whale scat."

"I've not seen this done," Sheriff's Meadow executive director Adam Moore said. "I've heard about dogs being used for conservation purposes. In this instance, this is Julie and Kristine's idea. I'm very fond of our new turtle."

### **Turtle search**

Finding live test turtles for Max was, somewhat appropriately, a slow process. Tom French, Assistant Director of Natural Heritage Endangered Species Program (NHESP) for the Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW), required that Ms. Fauteux and Ms. Russell employ more than one turtle, since the scent of just one wouldn't make for an effective search and rescue dog. But they couldn't use turtles found in the wilderness.

"Turtles have very strong homing instincts and they'll keep trying to find their way home, which is when they get run over," Ms. Russell said. Protocol dictates that once a rescued turtle is restored to health, it's kept for educational purposes. "The only box turtle in captivity on the Island is at Felix Neck," Ms. Russell said. "It's been there 40 years. We had to book the turtle through Susan Bellincampi, [director of the Mass Audubon Society's Felix Neck Wildlife Sanctuary], and it had a pretty busy schedule."

While they waited for their new turtle, Ms. Ogden went off Island to the Cape Cod Wildlife Center in Barnstable, a wildlife rehabilitation facility, and got the scent from five "hospitalized" box turtles by rubbing their skin with gauze, and she began training Max.

"We could only get so far with that method," Ms. Ogden said. "There's a big difference between residual odor and live odor," Ms. Ogden said. "We don't want to know where the turtle was, we want to know where it is."

### **Here's Johnny**

Working through Natural Heritage, Ms. Fauteux and Ms. Russell finally secured the services of Johnny, one of the five turtles Ms. Ogden had sampled at the Cape Cod Wildlife Center three months prior.

"It took a while to get all the permits in place to get Johnny here," Ms. Fauteux said. "Kevin Clayton, the environmental police officer assigned to the Island, lives on the Cape, so he brought Johnny over. We went to the West Tisbury police station and signed the papers and I brought her home."

While giving Johnny “his” physical, Ms. Fauteux realized Johnny was a female. “She was named before they sexed her. So we call her Johnny Sue,” Ms. Fauteux said, gingerly carrying Johnny Sue to her customized box, as the nervous terrapin emptied her bladder on the Sheriff’s Meadow office floor.

Ms. Fauteux hid Johnny Sue, in her carrier, beneath a few inches of leaf cover, just off a trail. Anticipation was high as Ms. Ogden let Max out of her truck. “Max knows when I put on the vest it’s time to go to work,” she said, suiting up Max with a yellow vest. “Dogs have the same finesse detecting smells as humans have detecting color,” she said. “This area around here is like a high-definition TV for Max. You have animal smells, people smells, plant smells. His behavior will look very different when he’s on target odor. There’s a difference between “that smells interesting” and “that smells *really* interesting. Hopefully, he’ll pick up his pace about 10 yards away.”

Ms. Ogden leashed Max, and with a quick voice command set him to work. Tail wagging, Max started sniffing along the trail. “Over time, the odor of the box turtle will be the cue for Max to lie down,” Ms. Ogden said.

It didn’t take long for Max to sniff out Johnny Sue on his first trial run. He was rewarded with a lick of dog food in a small cup, and by applause of a handful of spectators. Max passed two more tests with flying colors.

Although they’re not able to determine Johnny Sue’s age, it’s quite possible she was alive when the first world war was raging and Charlie Chaplin was the biggest star on the (silent) screen. According to a Harvard University study, the box turtle most likely colonized the East Coast after the retreat of the glaciers after the Pleistocene ice age. Turtles as a species have seen dinosaurs come and go.

Thanks to Max, Johnny Sue, and some talented and dedicated humans, the future looks a bit brighter for box turtles on the Island. They might even be around when there’s a new Stop & Shop.

### **Caution needed**

June is nesting time for box turtles and they are particularly mobile, so wildlife officials ask that people pay extra attention when driving, particularly in West Tisbury and Chilmark, where there is the highest concentration of box turtles, according to Mass Wildlife.

Wildlife officials advise that turtles should not be handled unless they are in danger of being mowed or hit by traffic. If you see a turtle crossing the road, put it on the other side of the road in the direction it was headed.

If you see a box turtle, on the move or nesting, report the location to Kristen Fauteux at Sheriff’s Meadow Foundation at 508-693-5207.

Females nest in fields or residential yards, areas where the nest will get sunlight throughout the day to incubate the eggs, so check before you mow.