

Oasi di Bolgheri

The European Pond Turtle in the Bolgheri Bird Sanctuary

Tuesday, 24/06/2014 - h.6.40 pm



Returning from a brief late afternoon visit in the Bolgheri Bird Sanctuary accompanied by my wife Silvana, along the avenue of Renaione, I sense the presence of a dark spot almost on the roadside. I stop and get off the car. The silhouette is unmistakably that of the pond turtle, a species of vertebrate among the rarest in Europe, and, fortunately, present in this bird sanctuary with a stable and consolidated population. In stooping down to pick it up and carefully place it out of harms way safe from any passing car, I realize that the carapace, above, shows a line of separation between the horny plates about 4 cm long. The same appears on the bottom frame plate, perfectly corresponding to what is found on the top. Both lines of detachment present signs of blood; most likely this subject, female, was partially hit by a car in transit. While holding it in my hand, the tortoise urogenital orifice expels a significant amount of liquid; we will find an answer to this later.

We cannot leave the poor animal here, so we bring it to the entrance of the bird sanctuary where it is subjected to a thorough washing of the wounds. The animal seems to be almost in a trance, with few reactions to the stimuli that we exercise on the paws and head.

We leave it on the edge of the small pool that we made at the margins of the lawn area for the reception of the bird sanctuary.

Wednesday, 25/06/2014 h.6.50 am

The animal is located in the same position in which it was left 12 hours before. The phalanges in the fingers of the front paws are missing. Result, probably, of the many disputes with males during the coupling steps. Stimulating the legs and the head it shows normal reflexes. I leave it there.

I am back at 12.30 pm and I find something new. The animal is always in the same position, with the head fully everted, and with 8 eggs deposited on the ground, neatly grouped, one next to the other. One is damaged, probably by a paw of the female turtle.

The trauma has definitely reduced the performance of the female, unable to dig the hole where she could lay her eggs (usually 8 to 15 cm deep). But the instinct of procreation has prevailed and so the eggs were entrusted to the outdoors.

Had I not done anything, they probably would have been preyed upon by a few opportunistic species (the magpie, for example, nests in the vicinity...). I had the availability of a tub of dark plastic, used in gardening, rather capacious and fortunately full of soft vegetable soil. I dug a small hole in it and I have transferred the eggs, one next to the other, covering them without pressing the ground.

The bucket will have to be in the sun, allowing the warming up of the soil. The literature says that the time of incubation of the eggs varies between 80 and 90 days. And we will wait patiently for what we hope happens.

At 12.50 pm the animal moved spontaneously in the puddle and today, Thursday, 26/06/2014, at 6.50 am it was gone, probably having chosen to settle in the ditch nearby... more wild...

Nature once again proves to have many resources...

The reason why the European Pond Turtle has expelled a significant amount of liquid is to soften the soil before the excavation of the hole where it will lay its eggs.

Friday, 27/06/2014 6.00 am The story ends with the discovery inside the pool for amphibians of our tortoise now lifeless. Nature is cruel and cynical.

Wednesday, 24/09/2014 8.10 am

Like any self-respecting rule of Nature, after exactly 90 days of incubation, the first eggs of European Pond Turtle entrusted to the "artificial nursery " prepared at the entrance of the bird sanctuary on the 26/06/2014 hatched! I honestly did not think the wager made at the end of June could have had such a happy outcome ... During the usual monitoring performed in the early morning to the bucket keeper of the precious eggs, I noticed the presence of two hatched eggs on the soft layer of earth that preserved them for exactly 3 months.



The search was brief...

Wandering inside the tub, I found two small turtles, as large as a one EURO coin. At 1.00 pm the baby turtles were 3!!! The other eggs, for the moment still underground, do not give signs of imminent hatching.

I immediately set up a larger container, also equipped with a broad terracotta bowl where the small creatures can become familiar with the water, which is essential for their lives, and by entering shallow algae taken from the frog pool , where they will find their food consisting of small invertebrates.



Friday, 26/09/2014

The small turtles are very active. Their nursery seems to fit their needs, enriched with natural soil mixed with leaves retrieved by cleaning the gutters of the Kindergarten of San Guido, with the collaboration of Mario Gucci and a diet of eggs of snails, also retrieved by Mario from the gardens of San Guido.

After a short period of acclimatization and protection, the baby turtles, as Nature wants, will be entrusted to the ponds of the Oasis to go to increase the population of *Emys orbicularis* of the bird sanctuary, one of the most important in Tuscany.

Text and photos by Paolo Maria Politi