

Labrador Retriever Assists in Ecological Research

By Allan F. O'Connell, Jr.

As part of an ongoing research project, Gateway NRA biologist Bob Cook recently purchased a labrador retriever to aid in collecting box turtles. Known as Gus, the retriever locates and retrieves reintroduced box turtles (*Terrapene carolina*) in an attempt to determine their movements and survival rates.

Long Island, NY, was once a stronghold for the box turtle, but the population has declined due to habitat loss and urban development. As part of a larger effort to reintroduce and maintain viable populations of locally native reptiles and amphibians, Gateway staff have experimentally reintroduced over 300 box turtles into Floyd Bennet Field, a grassland section of the park.

Staff outfitted turtles with radio transmitters to determine home range and movements, but soon encountered problems relocating the animals due to limited transmitter range, dense vegetation, and the small size of the turtles. For help, Bob Cook contacted a colleague in Maine who owns and trains retrievers for field trials



Trainer Dave Mosher of Sugarfoot Kennel, Burnham, Maine with Gus who is holding a box turtle shell.

and who, in turn, contacted Dave Mosher of Sugarfoot Kennel, a professional retriever trainer. Cook purchased Gus from Mosher who owned a litter of puppies sired by a former national amateur field champion retriever. Cook then shipped to Maine turtle shells, as well as a live specimen, and training began. (Gus is trained as a "non-slip" retriever, a term used to indicate that the dog retrieves only on command).

Gus has now completed two summers collecting turtles and has located and retrieved individuals with and without radios. Although Gus will never compete in field trials and does not hunt waterfowl, he has contributed his share to natural resource management and conservation; he has helped staff to understand better the ecology of this fragile population by increasing sample size. The moral of this story: a dog is truly a man's best friend!

Allan O'Connell is a research wildlife biologist with the NBS and leader of the NPS CPSU at the University of Maine in Orono; he also runs retrievers in nationally sanctioned field trials.