

Tortoise Tracks

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.

Fall 1996, 16:2

DR. JOAN SCHNEIDER TO GIVE ANNUAL BANQUET PRESENTATION

Dr. Joan Schneider, who is author of the recent booklet, *The Desert Tortoise and Early Peoples of the Western Deserts*, will give the dinner address at the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee's Annual Meeting and Banquet. Her topic is "How Desert Tortoises Help Archaeologists Learn About Early Peoples." Dr. Schneider, who is currently a Staff Research Associate and Assistance Research Anthropologist at the University of California, Riverside, will discuss application of different methods (such as dating and faunal analyses), symbolic meanings, and ritual uses of tortoises.

Archeology is a second career for Dr. Schneider, who studied biology in her undergraduate years and then took a degree in public health. Through public health, she realized that her interests were in anthropology and how people approach and respond to diseases. Dr. Schneider returned to graduate school for a masters degree in anthropology and received her doctoral degree in the same field in 1993. She has conducted extensive fieldwork in the Mojave and Colorado deserts and currently has an ongoing research project in the Negev Desert. One of her particular interests is the role of women in prehistory as expressed in the archeological record, for example with tools and processing technologies.

DESERT TORTOISE POACHERS CAUGHT

On the 14th of October, Tracy Goodlett of Ridgecrest was working on a field project near Kramer Junction on State Highway 58, when she witnessed two men poaching a desert tortoise. Her curiosity was aroused, when she noticed a pick-up truck make a quick U-turn on Highway 58. As she approached the site where the pick-up made the turn-around, she observed a desert tortoise on the gravel shoulder of the highway. As she slowed her vehicle to rescue the tortoise and move it back into the desert, the passenger in the pick-up truck collected the tortoise, placed it in the back of the pick-up, and the two men drove away. So Tracy followed the vehicle, catching up with it at the four-way traffic signal at Kramer Junction. There she was able to record the truck's license plate number and get a brief description of the vehicle. She then called to report the incident to the Interagency Dispatch in San Bernardino.

Almost three hours later, Tracy Goodlett received a telephone call from Ms. Joan Blais of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in Barstow, California. Ms. Blais informed her that BLM

Ranger Ed Ruth from the Bakersfield District Office had located the suspects and the tortoise in Bakersfield, California. Ms. Blais requested that Tracy travel to Bakersfield and meet with Ranger Ruth to give him a statement regarding the incident. When Tracy met with Ranger Ruth, she was given custody of the tortoise to return it to the capture site. Since Tracy is a wildlife biologist with expertise in desert tortoises, she was able to evaluate the health status of the animal. An adult male, the tortoise appeared to be stressed, probably from riding in the open truck bed during the heat of the day. She held the tortoise for several days in isolation to give it an opportunity to recover from the incident and then released it in the area from which it was taken.

Thank you Tracy, on behalf of all of us, for a job well done!

PILOT KNOB RANCH VENTURES COMPLETES FIRST YEAR OF ACTIVITIES AT BLACKWATER WELL

Last fall the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc. (DTPC) acquired the grazing rights on the Pilot Knob Allotment in northwestern San Bernardino County, by purchasing 1,360 acres of critical habitat for the desert tortoise in the Central Mojave Desert. This "base property" gives the DTPC first grazing rights to the 49,000 acre cattle allotment located 25 miles southeast of Ridgecrest and 25 miles east of the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area (DTRNA). The Pilot Knob Allotment is managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The DTPC is working with the BLM to develop a long-term plan for the management of biological resources, resource conservation, and restoration of desert tortoise critical habitat on the Pilot Knob Allotment. The DTPC will pursue an amendment to the California Desert Conservation Area Plan to permanently retire the grazing permit on the allotment.

During the months of February through July of this year, the DTPC contracted with Audry Jones, a volunteer with the BLM, Ridgecrest Area Office, to serve as on-site Host/Interpreter at Blackwater Well. During this period, Ms. Jones and her son lived in the small cabin purchased as part of the land transaction. As Host/Interpreter, Ms. Jones distributed visitor interpretive materials, periodically patrolled the allotment to check the condition of range improvements such as fences, windmills and water tanks, maintained a presence at the remote location to deter vandalism, and assisted BLM Wildlife Biologists, Bob Parker and Joyce Schlachter, with desert tortoise transects on the allotment. The 12.7 miles of transects completed in June, located 57 tortoise burrows and the shell remains of one tortoise with evidence of raven predation. No live tortoises were found. The committee is currently looking for another Host/Interpreter to continue these activities during the upcoming year.

Recent Activities at Blackwater Well

Discarded batteries and debris were cleared from a storage building adjacent to the ranch cabin at Blackwater Well by members of Desert Survivors, a San Francisco Bay Area based group during their participation in the Fall Work Party at DTRNA, October 26 to 27. This hazardous waste and miscellaneous debris was removed from the site with the assistance of BLM Maintenance Supervisor, Jerry Williams. Several weeks later, Jerry Williams returned to Blackwater Well

with DTPC Board members Laura Stockton and Karen Spangenberg to trace and map the water system.

Future Activities Planned by Pilot Knob Ranch Ventures

Three projects are planned for this next year: 1) long-term photo-monitoring will begin with the help of Bob Keeran, a resident of Silver Lakes; 2) maintenance and repair of water improvements on the allotment by the DTPC is required in order to hold the grazing permit and retain water rights for wildlife conservation use; and 3) nomination to the State Historical Register is being sought for ranch buildings at Blackwater Well. Human use and occupation in the area of Blackwater Well spans a period from 1200 BC to the present. The well itself is the result of a naturally occurring seep created by the Blackwater Fault. The year-round water source provided a focal point for use by local aboriginal peoples that may have continued until the 1820's. Blackwater Well served as a "wet stop" along the 20 Mule Team Borax Wagon Road created by the Pacific Borax Company in 1883 to haul borax from mines in Death Valley to the railhead at Mohave. Cattle ranching activities began in the area in the early 1990's.

Members interested in being involved in any of the above activities please contact Karen Spangenberg at (818) 766-4327 or contact DTPC at 1-800-525-2443. Interested members from the Ridgecrest and High Desert Areas are particularly needed.

PLAQUES HONORING DONORS NOW IN PLACE AT THE DESERT TORTOISE RESEARCH NATURAL AREA

On Sunday, November 10, Ray Butler and Kristin Berry spent the day placing and cementing plaques into the ground on the western wall of the kiosk at the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area. The plaques honor 15 individuals, foundations, and organizations for their major donations to the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee. During the day, 17 people visited the Natural Area and walked the trails. According to Kristin Berry, the day was beautiful, crystal clear, and mild--the perfect fall day for a hike, but too late in the season to observe tortoises, which are underground and hibernating.

DESERT TORTOISE COUNCIL TO HOLD 22ND ANNUAL MEETING AND SYMPOSIUM IN APRIL OF 1997

The Desert Tortoise Council will celebrate its 22nd year in the spring of 1997 at the Annual Meeting and Symposium in Las Vegas, Nevada. The meeting and symposium are scheduled for April 4, 5, and 6 at Sam's Town.

MEMBERS OF THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES PLAN RESEARCH PROJECTS AT THE DESERT TORTOISE NATURAL AREA

Laura Stockton, a long-term member of the Board of Trustees, has taken a year of sabbatical leave from teaching to conduct research and monitoring at the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area from fall of 1996 through spring of 1997. She is focusing on two major projects: a comparison of perennial grasses inside and outside the fence in the northern part of the Natural Area; and the gathering and analysis of data on the desert tortoise and its habitat in the vicinity of the kiosk. She has already begun the project on the native perennial bunch grasses and is working with Kristin Berry and Matt Brooks on the research design. She will be gathering baseline and comparative data for long-term research and monitoring on a perennial bunch grass, the one-sided bluegrass (*Poa secunda* ssp. *secunda*), as well as desert needle grass (*Achnatherum speciosum*) and Indian rice grass (*Achnatherum hymenoides*). The one-sided blue grass appears to be confined to the north slopes of the Rand Mountains. This project is part of a major research effort to measure differences and similarities in animal and plant populations inside and outside the Natural Area.

In spring of 1997, Laura will lead a field team of biologists who will gather data on desert tortoises at the long-term desert tortoise study plot surrounding the kiosk and parking lot in the southeastern corner of the Natural Area. She will be working closely with Dr. Kristin Berry, who initiated the project in 1979 and is in charge of the monitoring effort for the U.S. Department of Interior. The same methods for monitoring that have been employed since 1979 will be used to determine population trends. Laura already has commitments of field assistance from several field biologists, including Board Member Karen Spangenberg, Robert Parker and Joyce Schlachter of the Bureau of Land Management's Ridgecrest Office, Marc Sazaki of the California Energy Commission, and Frank Hoover of the California Department of Fish and Game.

Laura Stockton's efforts not only will make a major contribution to our knowledge of trends in the floral and faunal communities at the Natural Area but also will provide her with new teaching tools for her students in future years. When she returns to teaching in fall of 1997, Laura will be providing information to her students on testing hypotheses in science, methods for field surveys (particularly in deserts), several different types of data analyses, and, of course, the results. She will also show her students how the data can be applied to the decision-making processes for wildlife and land-use agencies

NATURALIST REPORTS VISITATION DOWN AT THE NATURAL AREA AND AT OTHER DESERT ATTRACTIONS

From March 9 through May 31, 1996, Sonja Norstedt served as naturalist at the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area located northeast of California City in the western Mojave Desert of Kern County. During this time 342 groups totaling 1,186 individuals were recorded to visit at the Interpretive Center. Visitors were from 20 states and five foreign countries. Three quarters of the groups were first-time visitors. Visitors were curious about the size of the DTRNA, its history, the agencies involved and their functions, and how the lack of rainfall and annuals would affect the tortoise population. Seasonal visitation was half the number compared to that in 1995. Attendance was also down 25% and 50%, respectively, during April and May, at near-by Red

Rock Canyon State Park. Spring storms destroyed flowers at the Antelope Valley Poppy Reserve and shortened their season. Possible explanations for lower visitation rates in 1996 may include lack of rainfall, thus lack of wildflowers, and the increase in gasoline prices.

ANNUAL MEETING AND BANQUET

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc. will host the annual meeting of the corporation and banquet on Saturday, January 11, 1997 at the Green Tree Inn in Victorville. The meeting of the corporation is open to all members and the general public.

The afternoon meeting offers an opportunity to meet other Committee members and the current Board of Trustees and or members to hear first-hand about the Committee's accomplishments during 1996 and it's plans for 1997. The meeting will include status reports on the Committee's progress on the Harper Lake Road mitigation and progress at Pilot Knob Allotment.

Plan to attend both the afternoon annual meeting and the evening dinner and presentation. If you cannot be present for the afternoon annual meeting of the corporation, we hope you will be able to joining us for the evening dinner and program featuring a talk by Dr. Joan Schneider. The price of the dinner is \$17.00 per person, including tax, tip, beverage and dessert.

The schedule of events for January 11, 1997 is as follows:

Annual Meeting 2:00 - 5:00 p.m.

Social Hour 5:00 - 6:00 p.m.

Dinner and Program 6:00 - 9:30 p.m.

Please note that your reservation must be received by December 28, 1996.