

Tortoise Tracks

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.

Summer 1998, 18:2

AMBITIOUS CREW GATHERED FOR ANNUAL SPRING WORK PARTY WEEKEND

A crew of 27 participated in the Saturday, March 14 work party at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area (DTNA). Represented were the Bureau of Land Management by staff and volunteers (Bob Parker, Janell DeAngelis, Amanda Bresette); Desert Survivors (Ryan McMullen, Kimberly and Scott Hieatt, Joann Barbee, Howard Derrickson, Claudia Davison, Peter Ruddock, Ron Harron, Steve Jones, David McMullen, Andy McMullen, Elliot Sowalsley, Ruth O'Day); the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee by members and volunteers (Bob and Letty Brooks, Jim Anderson, Mary Shepherd, Karen Spangenberg, Laura Stockton, Emilie Kennedy); San Diego Herpetological Society (Rhonda Thompson, Jodie Thompson); and local communities (Chuck Hemingway, Anne Marie Swanson).

The primary focus was preparing the Interpretive Center for the DTNA's many spring visitors. In addition to the interpretive kiosk and outhouse cleaning, the main interpretive trail required a great deal of work. A pickup truck load of exotic weeds was hoed, raked, bagged and removed. A smaller team of volunteers traveled to the west side of the DTNA to replace signs, do minor fence mending and pick up trash.

The entire crew had the pleasure of welcoming the new naturalist on her first official day at the DTNA, on what probably turned out to be the heaviest use day by visitors at the DTNA this spring. A group of 50 students from Bakersfield College stopped by as part of a field trip to study desert ecology as did numerous smaller family groups taking advantage of the pleasantly cool local weather (it was raining heavily in the Antelope Valley and further south).

That evening, a slightly different configuration of volunteers gathered at Pilot Knob's Blackwater Well to camp out in preparation for Sunday's continuation of the work party weekend at that location. Jim Bills and Richard Olson, the volunteer Host/Interpreters at Blackwater Well, hosted a chicken barbecue around the campfire for thirteen Desert Survivors; DTPC Board Member, Karen Spangenberg and several friends; Ed LaRue of the Bureau of Land Management (he just happened to be passing by); and friends of the Host/Interpreters from the communities of Randsburg and Johannesburg.

On Sunday, after breakfast and exploratory hikes in the area, the group spent the morning loading barnyard junk (metal, wire, rotten hoses, glass, etc.) from the "pit" just northwest of the barn into Richard's large trailer and Andy McMullen's pickup truck to be hauled away. By late

morning, the Desert Survivors split into two groups and departed Blackwater Well to search for section markers of the private property within the Pilot Knob Grazing Allotment owned jointly by DTPC and The Wildlands Conservancy. Rock cairns (but no metal markers) were located for the northeast and southeast corners of Section 16 and the northwest and southwest corners of Section 36. The shell remains of a tortoise were found in Section 36. The group compiled the beginnings of a Pilot Knob plant list with 68 species.

Meanwhile back at the ranch, Jim Likowsky photographed all the structures and representative disturbed areas at Blackwater Well for long-term photo monitoring of the allotment. The Host/Interpreters along with several desert locals and DTPC/BLM volunteer, Sterling Kendrick, weeded around the cabin to prevent fire and snake hazards later on in the season (the mustards and fiddlenecks were waist high in the corral). The group began to disperse by mid-afternoon for the long drive back to the Bay Area or Los Angeles. A huge amount of work was done and a good time was had by all.

FEATURING VOLUNTEERS

Charles Hemingway - Chuck, our favorite California City resident, has been a very busy and productive volunteer for the DTPC this past winter and spring. He kept an eye on the Natural Area boundaries and structures and stayed in touch with the Board over the winter months. He supervised the refurbishing of the Discovery Center's upholstery and personally did much needed cabinetry repairs and cleaning in preparation for the

arrival of the on-site Naturalist at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area (DTNA). Laboring at the spring work party, he filled dozens of bags with those pesky exotic weeds. He was a local resource and good company for the on-site Naturalist during her three-month stay at the DTNA. It can get pretty lonely out there and Chuck spent a good deal of time assisting Karen Randall at the Natural Area. He also provided her with much-appreciated showering facilities and other comforts of home away from home. Chuck assisted Frank Hoover in the field and provided the home base for a two-month long survey of the Honda Study Plot (Section 8) for tortoise activity and habitat status this spring as well. An amazingly, dedicated volunteer.

Thank you, Chuck!

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee

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FALL WORK PARTY DATES FOR THE DTNA AND PILOT KNOB

Tentatively scheduled for November 7 & 8, 1998. Look for more information in our fall edition.

BOARD ACTIVITIES

Annual DTPC/BLM Coordinating Meeting Held - The Board held its annual coordinating meeting on June 27, with the BLM's Ridgecrest Resource Area staff at the BLM offices in Ridgecrest.

The Board extended its congratulations to Lee Delaney, area manager of the Ridgecrest office, on his promotion and wished him the best of luck in his new position. Board President, Bob Brooks, and individual members expressed their appreciation and thanks for the cooperative working relationship that has developed between the Ridgecrest BLM office and the DTPC, during Lee's tenure. Though Lee will be greatly missed, the Board is looking forward to the continuation of that mutually productive relationship with the Ridgecrest Resource Area's staff.

Lee Delaney, area manager of the Ridgecrest Resource Office of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), has been promoted and assigned to Washington, D.C. He will be reporting to his new position as the Group Manager for Wild Horse and Burros, Range land, Soils, Water and Air effective August 30, 1998. Lee has been with the Ridgecrest office since March 1989 and with BLM since 1969. The new Ridgecrest area manager has not yet been named and the assumption is that someone from the local office will be designated as acting manager for an as yet undetermined length of time.

Site Enhancements for DTNA - Among other items discussed with BLM staff at the coordinating meeting was a surprise presentation by Dave Wash, Lead Outdoor Recreation Planner. Dave had very exciting and well received ideas for some relatively inexpensive site enhancement projects for the Desert Tortoise Natural Area. Among the ideas were a new orientation kiosk between the access trail portal and the parking lot to reduce the current sign clutter at the entrance; development of one universal access (handicapped) parking space in the existing parking lot; and enhancement of trail signing for all three trails. A small subcommittee of BLM and DTPC Board members was selected to work with Dave on details and implementation.

Installation of the new state-of-the-art toilet at the DTNA by BLM was acknowledged! It was in place and usable by May 20, after two days of construction. The on-site Naturalist and visitors were thrilled.

Mohave Ground Squirrel Research Grant - The California Energy Commission awarded a grant to DTPC for a research and monitoring project on the Mohave ground squirrel in the Western Mojave Desert. A steering committee to select the two study-sites for this three-year study will meet this summer.

Ord Mountain Allotment Grazing Appeal - The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee joined with the Desert Tortoise Council and the Natural Resources Defense Counsel in filing a formal appeal with the BLM regarding its final decision of March 6, 1998 to allow grazing on the Ord Mountain allotment.

The appeal is based on a number of factors including the allotment holder's failure to comply with BLM mandates on grazing practices and management practices specified by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in a biological opinion.

The three organizations are concerned that the desert tortoise and its critical habitat are not being adequately protected.

THIS SPRING AT THE DTNA WAS THE BEST!

By Karen Randall, DTNA Naturalist

This spring I had a wonderful and rewarding experience working as the naturalist at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area (DTNA). When I began my job in March I had limited knowledge of the Western Mojave Desert eco-system. With March being on the cool side and visitation low, it gave me the opportunity to explore the Natural Area and begin to learn the annuals and perennials, along with the desert tortoise's natural history.

The wildflowers were fun to learn, but the shrubs were a little more tricky. In April, the Natural Area was alive with brilliant colors of the wildflowers. Tortoises were coming out of their burrows from their winter hibernation to warm up and feed on the lush vegetation. From my observations their favorites were the Lupine, Lotus, Desert Dandelion, and Wild Hyacinth. In May the annuals began to dry up and the perennials took over. I had been waiting two months to see the yellow of the Creosote bush, purple of the Paper-bag Bush, and the bright gold of the Golden Head.

The tortoises were great to observe, busy feeding while getting their mouths all green from the succulent vegetation. Tortoise #568 would come around the Discovery Center three to four times a week feeding, resting in the shade during the heat of the day, and then more feeding on her way back to her burrow for the night. Many visitors were able to observe her and enjoyed when she would walk over to them and rest in their shade. She was the most photographed and popular tortoise, especially with return visitors who were hoping to find her again.

Along with the tortoises, the reptiles, birds, and mammals were a lot of fun. The lizards put on a real show for everyone. I had the opportunity to follow both a Sage Sparrow nest and a Say's Phoebe nest through to the hatchlings' fledging. The four Say's Phoebe fledglings stayed around the kiosk for over two weeks. When I left at the end of May, the Phoebe had started a new nest in the kiosk. A pair of Burrowing Owls with their nine young was a special find. Each morning and night as I drove through the gate, I would look forward to seeing a few of the owls near their burrow.

I think I may have been a little lucky this spring. I was spoiled with the abundant wildflowers, lush green vegetation, active wildlife, and mild weather. I had a great time meeting the visitors and getting to know some of them as they returned two or three times. I had three different photographers return later in the season bringing me some of the photos they taken on their prior

visits to the DTNA. Yet another couple gave me a small photo album and video they had made from their four visits this spring. I gained in my desert knowledge, met a lot of great people, and hopefully helped out the Desert Tortoise Natural Area and the Committee.

I would like to thank Dr. Kristin Berry and Glenn Goodlett for providing me with the opportunity to work at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area; Emilie Kennedy, the enthusiastic and funny intern who was here for a week in March; Karen Spangenberg for helping me learn the wild flowers; the BLM crew for coming by and checking up on me, especially Jerry, Jim, Joyce, and Dan; Laura Stockton for helping out with the tours on Saturdays; Susan Moore for providing me with merchandise and support; Jim Bills for working an extra day so I could have a day off; and Chuck Hemingway for helping out with the motor home, tours, and for his generous hospitality.

Ms. Randall grew up in Santa Barbara, California and has a BS in Wildlife Management from Humboldt State University. She is currently working for Redwood Sciences on the 10 year Spotted Owl demography study near Chester, California.

FOUR DAYS AT BLACKWATER WELL

Excerpts from the Journal of Richard Olson, Pilot Knob Host/Interpreter

Sat. 4/25, Morning. Burma Rd., Randsburg - Heading out to the ranch at Blackwater. Light breeze with temp in the 70's. It sprinkled sometime last night. Cloud shadows and lonely hills dot the broad alluvial plain on the way out to Pilot Knob. Ran into BLM Ranger Phil Butler who informed me that the "Stevens" sign is associated with some filming going on out on Cuddeback Dry Lake. Soon passed said film crew: a motor home, a semi w/cars and 2 grip trucks. Also encountered a large group of off-road bikers at the west edge of the lake. Let's see how well they and the film crew get along!

"Creosote Tree Wash" - Tortoise burrow (?) on north side of road down wash 45 paces on east side of wash. (not active).

"Limboland Rocks" - Tortoise sign (burrow) 2 paces off the road on north side.

Blackwater gate, Crawford fence> - Always gratifying to see the windmill stoically standing into the wind at this point.

Sat. 4/25, Late afternoon - A white Chevy Blazer and another similar white vehicle pass by headed east. Returned shortly and headed back out without stopping.

I walked east toward the Black Ridge and around to the north. Wildflowers (and everything else) lush and abundant. Grasshoppers rise at every step to settle again a little ways off.

Evening - A blustering wind buffets the air. It fingers the edge of the cabin roof; licks and whispers at the seams. The stovepipe's persistent shooshing and rattling are somewhat modulated by doves' coo-cooful lament that "day is done". These unlikely elements combine with each other to assume a comforting tone, and taken together have the effect of a lullaby. I snuggle into my blankets and Blackwater's peaceful embrace.

Sun. 4/26 - A leisurely day mucking the privy, weeding, watering, etc.

Afternoon - San Bernardino County Museum geology field trip stopped on their way out to Black Canyon, under the instruction of Bob Reynolds. 22 vehicles and 45 people! An eager and friendly group. Rufus (*Richard's dog*) was ecstatic.

Evening - There is no moon out and the sky is very big and close. The "Aquarids" meteor show is said to be in progress. After dinner I shall sit for my own private viewing. It is quiet, still and very beautiful this night at Blackwater.

Mon. 4/27, Morning (breezy, cool) - Gathered bunch grass to make a wreath. Started a lampshade.

Early afternoon - A knock on the door! Alan Mathews, a newly arrived plant counter (!), asking directions (part of a study headed by Matt Brooks). That transect is apparently around Pilot Knob tank #3.

Tue. 4/28 - Traveling out West Grass Valley Road toward Fremont Peak to verify location and condition of the "range improvements" listed on various Pilot Knob allotment maps. Seeing many iguanas. Four nice fat horned toads!

Cut in fence (locations indicated by mileage notations) and debris, including shot down target (?). Tortoise burrow (looks active) 57 paces off the road to the east. Follow the debris trail. Still heading north along the gunnery range fence, located 5 more cuts in the fence within three miles. At one the fence was mangled as though it had been driven through by something big and one post was missing. Checked out the Fremont Peak cattle guards (they really are cattle guards) and investigated the "South Well and Tanks". Found three tanks, one covered tank in pretty good condition with a few repairable holes, a well and stockyard with a big salt lick.

The Pilot Knob allotment really is HUGE!

Richard Olson is an artist and resident of Randsburg. He has shared the Host/Interpreter duties for the Pilot Knob allotment along with volunteer Jimmy Bills, also of Randsburg, since late January of this year.

**DESERT TORTOISE PRESERVE COMMITTEE
RECEIVES \$200,000 FROM MWA**

On April 28, the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee and the Mojave Water Agency concluded an agreement for environmental mitigation required by the construction of the Mojave River Pipeline. As part of the requirements of the Department of Fish and Game and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Mojave Water Agency (MWA) agreed to pay the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee (DTPC) \$200,000.

These funds are in exchange for conservation easements on the Committee's Pilot Knob properties for improvement to the environmental habitat. The funds will be used exclusively for critical work on those properties.

DTPC President, Robert Brooks, appeared at the MWA meeting on April 28 to express the Board of Trustees' appreciation. "The money will become a large component of our stewardship efforts to protect the critical habitat on the Pilot Knob property for years to come, and will be effectively managed so that this threatened species will have a home for future generations to appreciate," Brooks said.

The Pilot Knob properties are jointly held by the DTPC and the Wildlands Conservancy to promote good stewardship of critical habitat for the State Reptile, the Desert Tortoise and to promote the recovery of desert tortoise populations.