
Tortoise Tracks

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.

Winter 2006 26:4

The Chuckwalla Bench—Critical Desert Tortoise Habitat in the Colorado Desert



Blooming *Ocotillos* At The Chuckwalla Bench In The Colorado Desert Of Eastern Riverside County

The Chuckwalla Bench has long been a focus for land acquisition for the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee. This vast and remote desert expanse is located in California's Colorado Desert in a broad alluvial region between the Chuckwalla and Chocolate mountains (in eastern Riverside County). The Bench contains critical habitat for the desert tortoise and is one of the three main areas of land acquisition for the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, the other two being in the western Mojave Desert (the Desert Tortoise Natural Area and the Pilot Knob allotment east of Cuddeback Dry Lake). Although most of the land within the Bench is managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), many small private inholdings occur. The Committee is in the process of acquiring many of these inholdings in order to consolidate land ownership in this exceptional area.

With over 160 species of plants, the flora of the Bench is one of the richest in the Colorado Desert. Because of its rich diversity of desert vegetation and high tortoise densities, the area was originally established as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) under the BLM's California Desert Conservation Area Plan in 1980.

The area's alluvial fans supports nine species of cacti, including

The Chuckwalla Bench, continues on page 2

SIGNING OF THE DTNA

This past Fall, DTPC Board member Mark Bratton and DTPC volunteer Chuck Hemmingway spent two days replacing signs along roughly four miles of the Desert Tortoise Natural Area (DTNA) boundary. These signs clearly mark the boundary of the DTNA and indicate that the area is closed to vehicle traffic and to reptile collecting. These signs eventually fade in the intense desert sun, and were in need of replacement. Approximately 60 signs were installed or replaced. In addition to replacing signs, Mark and Chuck also removed two large bags of trash from the DTNA and fixed raven anti-perching devices on several of the fence posts. These devices discourage ravens from perching on the fence posts.

While replacing the boundary signs, Mark and Chuck noticed evidence of illegal sheep grazing within the DTNA on the southern part of sections 18 and 30. They found sheep scat within both of these sections, however, it appears that the sheep stayed along the fence line and did not move significantly through the two sections (they found all the sheep scat within 75 feet of the fence line). It appears that someone lifted the bottom of the fence up high enough to let the sheep in. Mark and Chuck repaired the fence where the sheep appeared to enter the DTNA.

Signing of the DTNA, continues on page 7

The Chuckwalla Bench, continued from page 1 the giant Munz cholla (pictured below). This rare, tree-like cactus occurs only in the Chuckwalla Bench area. An extensive network of desert washes threads through the Bench. Along these washes beautiful stands of ironwoods, palo verde, smoke trees, and desert willows predominate. These desert dry wash woodlands pro-

The Chuckwalla Bench historically supported some of the highest densities of desert tortoise in the California Desert. These populations have been severely reduced because of disease epidemics. In 1994, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service designated the Bench and a large area surrounding it as desert tortoise critical

habitat. The entire region (over 850,000 acres) is managed by the BLM as the Chuckwalla Desert Wildlife Management Area (DWMA).

Desert Dry Wash Woodlands Provide Important Habitat For A Variety of Bird Species



Desert Dry
Wash with
palo verde
and
ironwoods
lining the
sides of the
wash .

vide important habitat for a variety of bird species. Burro deer (also called desert deer, a desert adapted species with huge ears) are found in the wash habitats during most of the year. Desert bighorn sheep occur in the surrounding desert mountains. Pronghorn, *Antilocapra americana*, was once abundant on the Bench but disappeared in the early 1950's. There have been proposals to reintroduce this species.



**M u n z
Cholla
(*Opuntia
munzii*)**



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The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.
Founded 1974

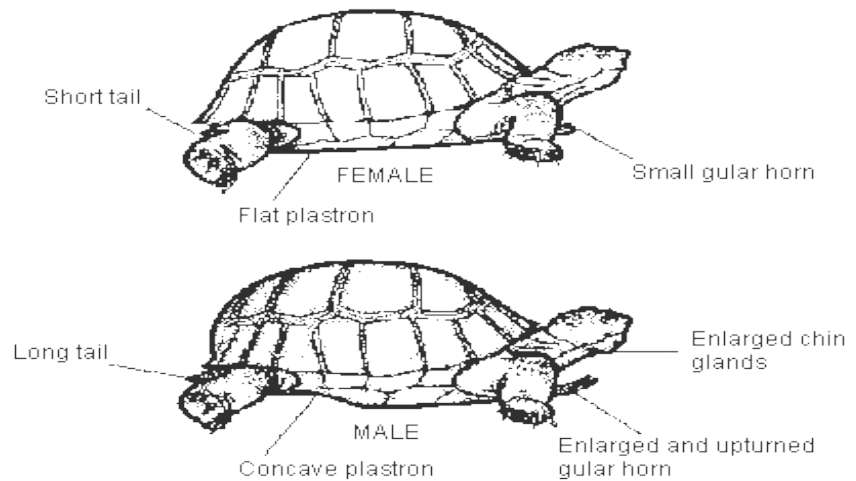
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Natural History Notes

Sexual dimorphism is a difference in body size or shape between males and females of a species. Desert tortoises exhibit several sexually dimorphic traits. Male desert tortoises have concave plastrons (the bottom part of the shell), and longer thicker tails than the females. Although both males and females have chin glands, those on the male are larger and more pronounced. Males are also considerably larger in body size and have longer gular horns (anterior projections of the plastron). The male's concave plastron aids him in mounting the back of the female, and his longer

Sexual Dimorphism in the Desert Tortoise



"MALE TORTOISE #61 COURTS FEMALE TORTOISE #46 AT THE FORT IRWIN STUDY SITE BY RAMMING AND BITING HER. DURING THE INITIAL STAGES OF COURTSHIP THE MALE WILL RAM AND BITE THE FEMALE REPEATEDLY UNTIL SHE REMAINS STATIONARY AND ALLOWS THE MALE TO MOUNT HER."



tail probably assists in locating her cloaca. His larger chin glands come into play mainly during the mating season—tortoises evidently do much of their communicating through pheromones secreted by the chin glands. The larger body size and the longer gular horn lengths in males aid in male-male combat. Male combat commonly occurs in desert tortoises, as well as in all members of the family Testudinidae. Larger tortoises have an advantage in aggressive encounters, which involve ramming and flipping of opponents. The enlarged gular horns are used as weapons to ram and flip opponents. The winner of these agonistic encounters generally have more access to the females. The main sexually dimorphic trait of the female is her longer claws on the hind legs, which aid her in digging nests.



In Recognition of Dr. Michael Connor's Service



Dr. Michael Connor, who served as Executive Director to the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc. (Committee), since 1999, has resigned. While he will continue to work in the field of conservation, he has no immediate plans. The Committee would like to thank Dr. Connor for his individual contributions and team-based accomplishments during the last seven years of service to the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee:

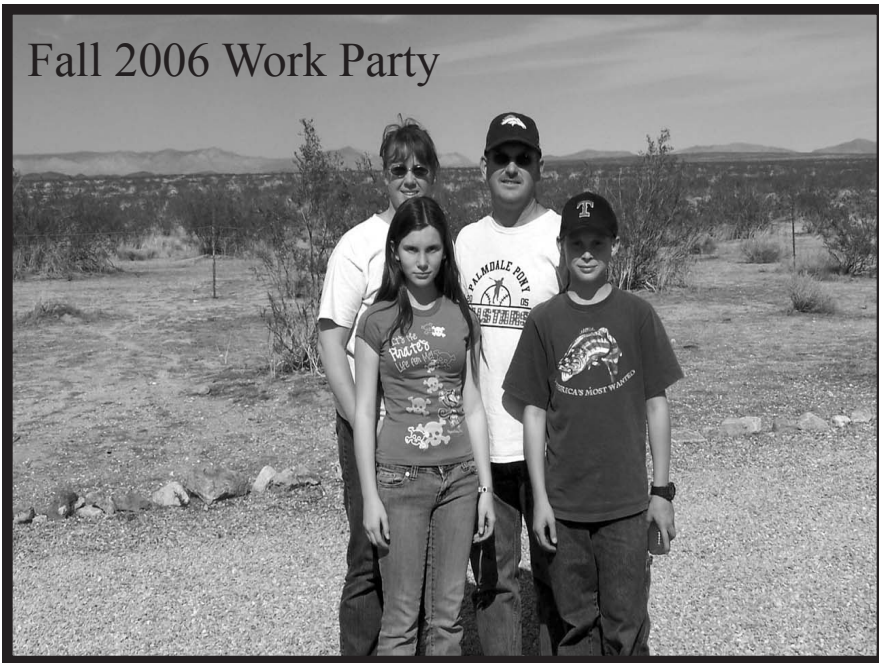
- Dr. Connor arranged for the Naturalist at the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area each spring and coordinated with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to obtain cost-share grants, whereby both the BLM and the Committee contributed to the funding to the program.

- Dr. Connor prepared and revised management plans for the two major preserves at the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area and Pilot Knob. The management plan for the Natural Area formalized land expansions on the eastern and western boundaries. The new boundaries were written into the BLM's new management plan for the West Mojave Desert.
- Dr. Connor contributed annually to the work parties at the Natural Area and Pilot Knob. At the latter area, he successfully reduced the large amounts of trash.
- As part of the Harper Lake Road mitigation project, the culvert was completed under the Harper Lake Road, allowing tortoises to cross from one side of the road to another.
- Dr. Connor worked on raising funds, including an annual commitment to service hours for Earthshare. In addition, he obtained a grant from the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program to restore tortoise habitat in an area heavily damaged by vehicles.
- As part of a land acquisi-

tion and mitigation project for the Chuckwalla area of the Colorado Desert (prime tortoise habitat and habitat for rare plants), Dr. Connor arranged for a survey of the rare Harwood milkvetch. Many new localities were identified as a result of this research. During this last year, funds were transferred from the Chuckwalla mitigation account to the Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden for a seed bank for the Harwood milkvetch to ensure perpetuation of the species.

- In 2006, a survey was conducted to identify areas of invasive plant infestation at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area and a major weed removal program targeting the mustard *Hirschfeldia incana* was initiated.
- Dr. Connor prepared numerous articles for Tortoise Tracks, the Committee's quarterly newsletter, to ensure timely publication.
- Dr. Connor represented the desert tortoise community (the Committee, Desert Tortoise Council, and California Turtle and Tortoise Club) at many government meetings involving recovery of the

Fall 2006 Work Party



This year's Fall Work Party had a lower than normal turnout with only eight participants. Participants included DTPC Board members Laura Stockton and Mark Bratton, DTPC volunteer Chuck Hemingway, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) wildlife biologist Bob Parker, United States Fish and Wildlife biologist Sandy Marquez, and the Curtus Family from Palmdale—Ken, Amy, Cindy, and Chris (Pictured above). Work completed included signage, trash removal, parking lot restoration, and clean-up of the interpretive kiosk. The Spring Work Party is March 31st to April 1st, 2007 and we hope to see you there. For more information contact Mark Bratton @ montanagrizzlies@adelphia.net.

In Recognition of Dr. Michael Connor's Service, continued from page 4

desert tortoise and implementation of the Desert Tortoise (Mojave Population Recovery Plan), which was published in 1994. These meetings included the West Mojave Plan, the Northern and Eastern Colorado Desert Plan, the Ridgecrest Area Steering Committee and Feral Dog Committee.

- Dr. Connor contributed to public education by providing material to the news media, as well as attending and giving presentations to the public

at museums, California Turtle and Tortoise Club shows, and other venues. During one year, he gave as many as 10 programs.

The above summary provides just a few examples of the work Dr. Connor accomplished during his tenure with the DTPC. He ensured the many facets of DTPC affairs ran smoothly.

Collectively, the Board of Trustees and members wish Dr. Michael Connor the best in his future plans. He personally made a major effort to recover the desert tortoise and its habitat through work with the

In Memory of Dharm Pellegrini (1962-2006)

by Jan (Kaur) Blair and Chuck Hemingway

Dharm Pellegrini passed on late June of this year. He was a long time resident of Long Beach, California. Dharm worked as a field biologist for the Orange County Water District on the Prado Wetland Project, a job he held during March through August for the last nine years. Dharm was best known as a bird expert of superior knowledge with almost unprecedented identification skills. His birding projects took him as far as New Mexico, Texas and Oregon. Among his favorite birding areas in California were many of the coastal beaches, the Salton Sea, Angeles National Forest, Central Park in California City, and Galileo Hill near the Desert Tortoise Natural Area. Dharm was a DTPC member and assisted the last three DTNA spring time naturalists with bird identification and added greatly to the annual naturalist reports. His ability with desert plant and flower identification and knowledge of the local reptiles assisted visitors and naturalists alike during his many spring time visits to the DTNA. Dharm was a volunteer with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (at their Carlsbad office), and held federal research permits for the least Bell's vireo and the southwestern willow flycatcher. He was a contributor to several online bird journals. Dharm freely shared his knowledge with many and will be missed by many more. Thanks Dharm.

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee Invites You to Join Us At Our *32nd Annual Banquet and General Meeting* **January 27, 2007**

The DTPC's Annual Meeting and Banquet will be held Saturday, January 27, 2007 at the Essex House Hotel & Convention Center, "Nina's Garden" 44916 North 10th Street West, Lancaster, California. The afternoon Annual Meeting will feature review of the Committee's ongoing programs and activities, plans for 2007, and guest speakers for the Bureau of Land Management and the Calif. Department of Fish and Game will give updates on important activities. The Banquet speaker will be Mark Massar, DTPC Board Member and BLM Wildlife Biologist.

PROGRAM

- Annual Meeting 2:00 to 5:00 P.M.
- Banquet Event 6:00 to 9:00 P.M.

Featuring: Mark Massar, BLM Wildlife Biologist

Mark will be discussing female choice in the mating system of the desert tortoise. Female choice is the preference females have to mate with particular males and not with others, and is a phenomenon seen throughout the Animal Kingdom. As Darwin put it, the males of many species attempt to "excite or charm" the females with "their gaudy coloring and various ornaments, their power of song, and their glands for emitting odors...the females exert some choice and accept one male in preference to others". But what evidence is there that female desert tortoises are likewise as discriminatory in their mating decisions? Mark will present evidence from the literature and from observations at a study site in the eastern Mojave Desert in an attempt to answer this question.



To RSVP and For Additional Information Contact:

Stephanie Pappas @ 805-901-8746 or csf@att.net, or Mark Bratton @ 661-943-3118, or montanagrizzlies@adelphia.net

\$ _____ **Dinner Reservation \$30.00**

\$ _____ **Optional tax-deductible donation**

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All contributors receive the quarterly newsletter *Tortoise Tracks*.

Membership and donor information are kept confidential and will not be disclosed to third parties.

I WANT TO VOLUNTEER

My area of interest/expertise is:

My E-mail address is:

Desert Tortoise Council 32nd Annual Symposium February 23rd-26th, 2007

Sam's Town Hotel and Casino, Las Vegas, NV.

This year there are several featured presentations and sessions. Dr. Dan Beck, author of a new book on gila monsters, will be hosting a session on the latest research on this desert reptile and will be signing his book. Dr. Beck reports that gila monsters have some important similarities to desert tortoises: a large bladder for storing water. Roy Averill-Murray of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is hosting a session on research and management actions underway by the Desert Tortoise Recovery Office. Several speakers from academia, new to the Council, will present in this session. Dr. Michael Manfredo and Dr. Tara Teel, both from Colorado State University, have recently completed a research project on how human values have changed toward wildlife in the 19 western states. Their study has general implications about fish and wildlife management, the acceptability of population control techniques and the changing nature of types of publics engaged. And of course there will be many papers on desert tortoises dealing with research, management issues, and conservation.

For Information and Registration go to: <http://www.deserttortoise.org/symposium/>

Signing of the DTNA, continued from page 1

Mark and Chuck also observed two dead burrowing owls along the western edge of sections 30 and 31. Both owls were adults and had been dead for some time, although the cause of death was unknown. The two owls were found within one mile of each other.





Tortoise Tracks

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DTPC CALENDAR OF EVENTS
March 31st to April 1st, 2007
Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee's
Spring Work Party
January 27, 2007
Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee
Annual Meeting & Banquet

Did You See This?

On January 1, 2007, the 118th Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena featured a float by the City of Palmdale with tortoises. Titled "Good Nature Begins At Home", the theme conveys the importance of Palmdale as home to both families and nature. The following is a direct quote from the Tournament of Roses magazine: "On the float, springtime arrives in the California high desert with the celebration of new life as two recently hatched desert tortoises explore their tranquil surroundings along side their mother. The vivid natural landscape comes magnificently alive in color and texture with barrel and cholla cacti in full bloom and sandy canyon walls that were created using over 20,000 roses in sunrise hues of golden rust, light and deep coral and glowing orange. The City of Palmdale's float honors and supportive families and depicts respect for the environment by