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# Tortoise Tracks

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The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.

Summer 2007 27:2

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## NATURALIST REPORT

BY EDWARD  
PATROVSKY,  
DTNA NATURALIST

Despite a record-breaking drought, we had another successful season at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area (DTNA). The DTNA Discovery Center was staffed 7 days a week from March 15<sup>th</sup> to June 4<sup>th</sup> 2007. I worked five days (and nights) a week and Chuck Hemingway volunteered two days a week. As usual, the naturalists hosted several large tours for schools, scouts, and other groups, including the California Energy Commission.

Visitation at the Discovery Center was down to 837 visitors this year, largely due to the lack of wildflowers. As compared to 1427 visitors in 2006, and 1686 visitors in 2005 when the wildflowers were abundant.

Rainfall at the DTNA totaled about 1/2" from October-April, about 10% of average. This was insufficient to germinate the wildflowers and annual plants that tortoises and many other animals eat. Therefore, few tortoises were observed this year at the DTNA. For the most part, tortoises seem to be conserving their energy until it rains again. However, we did observe a few tortoises that made themselves available during several days of viewing, usually just

inside their burrows. We made efforts to enable visitors to see a tortoise. A record-breaking 43% of the people walking the trails saw at least one tortoise this season.

Some tortoises, marked with numbers by previous tortoise surveys (which are normally done about every 5 years), made appearances again this year. This included #599, an adult female, who was observed in and near a burrow on the south side of the Animal Loop trail. An unmarked male tortoise took possession of a burrow in the same area which #1056 used last season. This tortoise made a habit of resting sideways near the entrance to his burrow, allowing good observations. An adult male (#1056), dug a new burrow

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to the north of the Animal Loop, and #1059 was observed in and near the same burrow he occupied last year. Franklin, a large adult male, was observed on one occasion southwest of the Discovery Center, and an unmarked adult of unknown sex was observed West of the Animal Loop.

There were two attempts made to release wild tortoises from outside the DTNA to the inside of the DTNA. These were intercepted by the naturalists. On both occasions, well-meaning motorcycle riders picked up the tortoises because they were walking in areas receiving heavy Off-Road Vehicle (ORV) use. The motorcycle riders thought they were protecting the tortoises from being hit by ORV's, and that they would be safer inside the DTNA. The naturalists counseled the riders by explaining that wild tortoises should be left alone unless they are in imminent danger, and informed them of the Federal and State laws which protect wild tortoises. Also, the DTNA fence is raised above the ground in order to allow tortoises to move inside and outside the perimeter as they wish. Both tortoises were released as close as possible to

the places they were picked up.

Visits to the DTNA by motorcycle and ATV groups continue to increase each year. This year a record 45% of total visitation were from ATV and motorcycle users. Many of these recreationists display a real interest in tortoise ecology, and a desire to learn more. Others in the vehicle groups are curious about the exhibits, or want to use the facilities. All are welcome, as long as their behavior is acceptable. On a few occasions, the naturalists had to correct misbehavior, such as riding off the entrance road, or tearing up the gravel parking lot.

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) continues to be an outstanding partner of the Discovery Center, providing materials which the naturalists used to improve the loop trails, and participating in the semi-annual work parties. On two occasions, the main BLM entrance sign to the DTNA was vandalized this season. Both times, Ridgecrest BLM Chief Ranger, Ron Lewis, responded.

On the first incident, somebody spray-painted the entrance sign, and another sign nearby, with

what appeared to be amateur gang graffiti. Ranger Lewis drove over in his patrol vehicle, took some photos, and drove down the Rand-Mojave Road towards California City. Almost immediately after Ron drove by, I noticed that a motorcycle camp a short distance off the road hurriedly packed up and left. I inspected the vacated camp, finding several empty cans of spray paint and a "practice pad", which the "artists" had used in an attempt to improve their imitation gang graffiti. Chuck and I were able to remove the paint from the signs.

The second incident occurred on a late Saturday night. Early Sunday morning, I noticed that somebody had intentionally run into the wood supports for the sign, knocking it over. Tire tracks from the scene appeared to match those of a pickup truck which was parked nearby, in a camping area called the "Pit" where several individuals appeared to be sleeping off a hangover. I called Ranger Lewis, who was on his way when the campers awoke and headed towards Cal City. I followed them and contacted the Cal City Police who stopped them. These individ-

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 Founded 1974

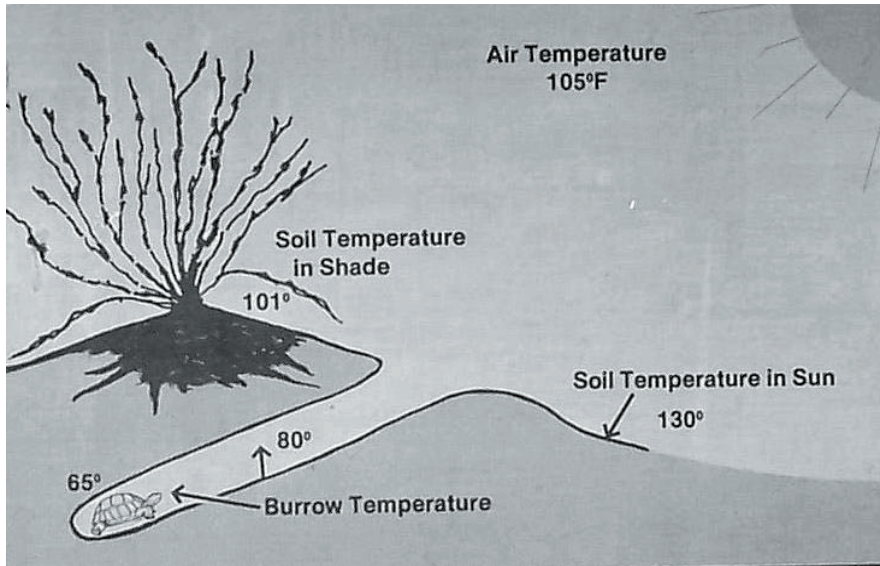
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## Natural History Notes

## Desert Tortoise Cover Sites By Mark Massar



Desert tortoises use a variety of cover sites (shelters) to seek refuge from temperature extremes and to wait out periods of low resource availability during mid-summer and winter. Hibernating in winter and estivating in summer, tortoises spend the vast majority of their lives—up to 93 percent—sequestered in their cover sites. Like all reptiles and other “cold-blooded” animals, tortoises must regulate

temperatures (the temperature the tortoise would actually experience) can be 20 degrees hotter or more than the air temperature!

Cover sites used by tortoises include self-dug soil burrows, small caliche caves in the banks of desert dry washes, shallow depressions dug under desert shrubs (called pallets) or in rocky crevices under rock piles. The types of cover sites vary geographically

within four general areas—Western Mojave Desert, southwestern Utah, Sonoran Desert in western Arizona, and Colorado Desert (a subdivision of the larger Sonoran Desert that lies west of the Colorado River in California).

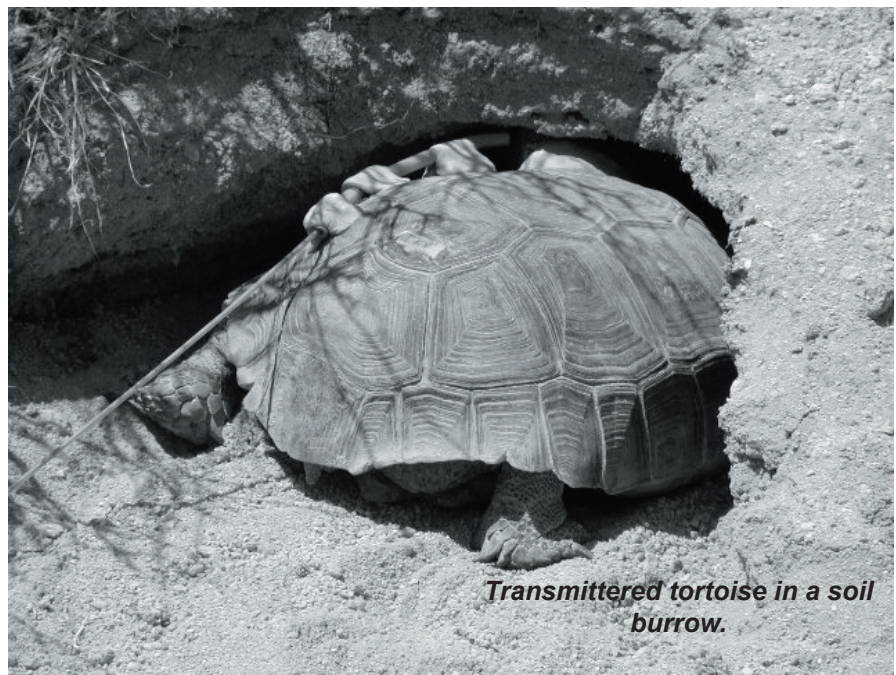
In the western Mojave Desert (in areas like the Desert Tortoise Natural Area) soil burrows predominate. Tortoises generally dig their own burrows in loamy or sandy soils, which are soft enough for the animal to dig, but not too soft that the burrows immediately collapse in upon themselves. Tortoises are strong diggers and dig soil burrows using their shovel-like forelegs. Soil burrows in the western Mojave Desert can be to 10 feet long and are commonly dug at the base of creosote bushes and other desert shrubs. They have half-moon shaped profiles with domed roofs and flat floors, mirroring the profiles of the tortoises

Desert Tortoise Cover Sites, continues on page 5



***Tortoises use their forelegs to dig burrows.***

their body temperatures behaviorally. The desert tortoise does this by moving in and out of its cover sites. During summer, when air temperatures can be a lethal 105°F, temperatures deep inside tortoise burrows are a comfortable and constant 70°F. Ground tempera-



***Transmitted tortoise in a soil burrow.***

## BLM & DTPC 2007 ANNUAL COORDINATION MEETING

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee (DTPC) held their annual coordination meeting on June 9 at the BLM Field Office in Ridgecrest, CA. Each year DTPC board members meet with the BLM Ridgecrest Field Office to discuss issues and accomplishments at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area (DTNA) and to plan for the coming year. The BLM and the DTPC jointly manage the DTNA, which BLM designated as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern in 1980.

Topics discussed ranged from law enforcement activities, OHV rider education, recent land acquisitions in and around the DTNA, fencing, reports on the Spring and Fall Work Parties, a report from the DTNA Naturalist, and many other issues.

BLM Chief Ranger Ron Lewis gave an overview of last year's law enforcement activities. Over the past year, there has been increasing vandalism at the DTNA. Vandals recently spray-painted the main entrance sign with graffiti, destroyed or stole a few of the



other signs, and a couple of unruly motorcyclists tore up the gravel DTNA parking lot with their bikes. Because of this apparent increase in vandalism, BLM rangers plan to increase patrols for the coming year. In addition, the Ridgecrest

Field Office is in the process of hiring more BLM rangers (the office currently has only 4 rangers to patrol a field office of over a million acres). One of these rangers will specifically target the DTNA and will be permanently stationed out of the California City Police Station close to the Natural Area. Another ranger position will concentrate on patrolling the Rand Mountains, a specially managed recreation area that borders the DTNA to the east. Ron also reported that beginning this year there will be new, increased fines for driving into BLM wilderness areas and other protected areas (increased to \$425), and repeat offenses can result in the confiscation of vehicles.

The BLM recently initiated an OHV (Off Highway Vehicle) Rider Education Program. This program teaches people about responsible off highway riding, including the difference between BLM open and closed routes, and the fines for riding off open routes. BLM is preparing a pamphlet and an interactive computer program, with a test and certificate. Riders will need to buy a permit to ride in certain areas, and the fee will pay for this education program. Riders must carry a permit with them at all times when riding on BLM lands as proof that they completed the education class or will otherwise be fined (and possibly have their vehicle confiscated).

Acquisitions in the DTNA Eastern Expansion Area are now about 45 percent complete. The Eastern Expansion Area connects the DTNA to desert tortoise critical habitat to the east, and will pre-

vent the DTNA from becoming an island of habitat. This has been a long time goal for the DTPC.

The DTPC is also involved in several fencing projects in and around the DTNA. Protective fencing surrounds most of the DTNA and keeps out OHV riders, but allows tortoises to move in and out of the Natural Area. The DTPC is in the process of fencing off the last remaining portions of the DTNA perimeter. One area of focus is Camp C, a heavily disturbed area in the eastern expansion area consisting of about 32 acres. The DTPC recently acquired this area, once popular with OHVs. With matching funds from the Department of Agriculture, we are fencing off and restoring this abused area.

Each year the DTPC hosts two work parties at the DTNA and the Pilot Knob, the DTPC's other major land holding and focus for desert tortoise conservation. The past two work parties have had a disappointingly low volunteer turn out. We discussed ways to improve work party participation, including recruiting the local Boy Scouts and sending postcards or emails to past participants. The work parties are excellent ways for people to become acquainted with the desert and to provide valuable conservation work. The Fall Work party is scheduled for Oct 13-14. BLM will again provide a dumpster for both the DTNA and Pilot Knob. They have also generously offered their Student Conservation Corps (SCA) crew to help with this Fall's effort. Incidentally, SCA crews this year restored areas in the Rand Mountains, virtually eliminating many of the illegal routes that traverse the area.



Desert Tortoise Cover Sites, continued from page 3



*Tortoise inside of a caliche cave.*

that constructed them. A tortoise may have many burrows within its home range, but will generally have a few preferred burrows which they will use day after day, and season after season.

In the western Mojave Desert, tortoises generally den by themselves. In the northeastern Mojave Desert in Utah the situation is different, where tortoises use long, complex, colonial dens with multiple rooms or chambers. Cover sites here can be up to 20 feet long with as many as 30 tortoises per cover site.

In the Colorado Desert tortoises dig out shallower burrows (or use existing small caves) in the banks of the many large desert washes which are prominent features of the landscape here. In the Sonoran Desert of western Arizona, tortoises occupy steep rocky hillsides with lots of boulders and rock piles. Cover sites here are typically rock shelters—crevices and openings between and under boulders. Despite their



*A series of caliche caves line a dry wash in the eastern Mojave Desert.*

awkward shape, tortoises are quite adept at climbing among rocks on steep slopes.

It is thought that the number of freezing days per year in a region determines the length of tortoise cover sites. Utah experiences the greatest number of freezing days (and hence has the longest borrows), and the Sonoran and Colorado deserts the least.

Desert tortoise burrows and caves are important not just as shelters, but also as areas for social interactions, particularly between the males and the females. Most courtships take place at the entrance to the female's cover site. During the breeding season, the male will travel in search of the female by visiting each of her cover sites in succession. Once he finds the female, he will remain with her, sometimes for several days at a time. He will share the cover site with the female, and will attempt to chase off (or will be chased off by) other visiting male tortoise. Because the cover sites are too small for the male to mount the female, he must entice her out of the cover site. To do this, the male performs head bobs while standing at the entrance of the cover site with the female watching from within. This initial head bobbing phase to the courtship can sometimes last several hours.

A number of other desert species depend on tortoise burrows to escape the desert heat. These species include burrowing owls, snakes, and numerous invertebrates. By providing cover sites for these other species, tortoises play an important role in the desert ecosystem.



# DTPC SPRING WORK PARTY

By Mark Bratton



On March 31 and April 1 2007, nine people volunteered for the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee annual spring work party. As usual, work was split between the Desert Tortoise Natural Area (DTNA) and Pilot Knob's Blackwater Ranch. Work at the DTNA included making repairs of the preserve's perimeter fence (fixing fence breaks and replacing boundary signs), and general maintenance work at the Interpretive Center in preparation for the Spring visitor season. This work included raking of the parking lot,

*Volunteers Steve Lawrence and Karen Jeans pose in front of the welcome sign at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area.*



*Volunteers remove trash and debris at Pilot Knob's Blackwater Ranch during this year's Spring Work Party. Efforts are being made to restore this area to more pristine conditions. About 1,000 pounds of trash were removed from the Blackwater Ranch.*



installing new parking blocks, cleaning of the information kiosk, and maintenance of the main interpretive trail.

At Pilot Knob volunteers camped out under a full moon and spent the day cleaning old ranching trash from Blackwater Ranch in a continuing effort to restore the area to a more pristine condition. Volunteers removed large amounts of trash such as concrete, sheet metal, piping, scrap wood, and old barbwire. Enough trash was removed to fill one large roll-off trash bin during the weekend effort. Future work parties at Pilot Knob will continue to remove debris from the ranch

and efforts will be made to eradicate non-native vegetation. The DTCP would like to recognize all the volunteers from this year's spring work party. They are: Steve Lawrence, Karen Jeans, Chuck Hemingway, Jim Prerey, Alia & Anika Javaid, Laruen & Mary Byrne, and Coleen Harkins. The Fall Work Party will be held the weekend of October 13 and 14th. If you are interested in volunteering for the Fall Work Party or more information you can contact Mark Bratton at [montanagrizzlies@adelphia.net](mailto:montanagrizzlies@adelphia.net).

## DESERT TORTOISE PRESERVE COMMITTEE

## MEMBERSHIP/DONOR FORM

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Please make checks payable to DTPC and mail to:

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The DTPC is an IRS recognized tax-exempt 501 (c)(3) nonprofit corporation. All contributions above the basic \$15 annual membership dues are tax-deductible to the full extent allowed by law.

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:

\_\_\_\_\_

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uals provided us with a pretty good vehicle description of the actual perpetrators who had left earlier. However, during questioning, one of the guys was showing the police that the bottom of his shoes did not match the footprints left at the scene of the crime when a bag of "Controlled Substance" fell out of his pocket. He was arrested!

When Chuck and I were not chasing vandals, we replaced the posts which mark the Plant loop, painted and stained several exhibit posts and signs, and did other work to improve the appearance of the DTNA. We are grateful to the Student Conservation Association volunteer crew which worked for the Ridgecrest BLM Field Office this year. This

crew inspected the entire 40 mile perimeter of the DTNA fence, and repaired several breaks.

The DTPC and BLM recently held their annual coordination meeting, and the eventual replacement of the Discovery Center motorcoach was discussed. This motorcoach has been used as an office and residence for the Naturalist for some 20 years. Different options are being considered, including the acquisition of a couple of surplus trailers from the BLM. One of these could serve as the naturalist's residence, and the other could house exhibits.

The Ridgecrest BLM Field Office also announced that they will be assigning a law enforcement

ranger to a "Resident Ranger" post in California City. This should provide better response times, more patrol of the DTNA area, and a community contact for the agency.

I also notified the DTPC that visitors have complained of the deteriorating condition of several highway signs which direct visitors towards the DTNA. These will be repaired or replaced in the near future.

Despite the lack of wildflowers, I enjoyed this Season, and my contact with the people who visited the DTNA. My thanks to those who helped make this season successful.





## Tortoise Tracks

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October 13-14, 2007

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RELEASE TORTOISES INTO THE WILDERNESS  
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