
Tortoise Tracks

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.

Fall 2008 28:3



photo by Brian Blackwelder

Reflections of a Naturalist

By Jan Blair

The end of spring is a time of reflection. I was glad I chose to return to the Desert Tortoise Natural Area (DTNA) as the Naturalist this spring. Visitation was low compared to the last season that I was the Naturalist, the spring of 2005 when wildflowers were abundant. DTPC volunteer, Chuck Hemingway made frequent visits. Without him I would have entered “no visitors today” on many of the daily data sheets.

A familiar face missing this year was that of my friend, Dharm Pellegrini, who passed away in 2006. Dharm, a wildlife biologist at Prado Basin, spent many of his days off observing the birds and Mojave ground squirrels at the DTNA. His expert birding skills were missed and I feared that the bird list for spring 2008 would suffer in his absence.

I made an effort to amend this by contacting the LAAudubon Society and asked them to add the DTNA to their spring fieldtrip list that already included local birding hotspots Galileo and Butter Brett

Springs. Several LA Audubon Society members came for a visit in early May. We toured the Plant Loop reviewing endemic shrubs and found a willing participant Zebra-tailed lizard for everyone’s photographic delight. The lizard jumped up on a rock striking the classic lizard postcard pose. We also walked the Animal Loop looking for a tortoise in a known burrow. A Black-headed Grosbeak and Wilson’s Warbler were identified, however the tortoise was not “at home” in the known burrow. A Horned Lizard helped to round out the visit for a last minute

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reptile photo shoot.

There were other memorable visitors this season. One morning a father and his seven-year-old daughter arrived on a dirt bike. She was riding sidesaddle and wearing a pink helmet. I was so touched by this attentive dad that I took the pair out to see a tortoise. So often at the DTNA one sees parents taking advantage of the profound way nature offers families a gift of closeness with each other and the earth itself. An adult male tortoise was foraging in a patch of goldfields while a female enjoyed the shade of a Creosote. Visitors are often in awe of the natural world in these moments, giving me, as a Naturalist, inspiration to stay upbeat and encouraged through the long season. The next morning the dad and his daughter returned. I said "You're back already?" and he replied, "She just has to have that yellow T-shirt". This duo returned weeks later to walk the trails of the DTNA at a leisurely pace spending about an hour looking for tortoises and other creatures on their own. Perhaps this young girl went on to share her lovely DTNA experience with classmates at school.

A trailer graciously provided by the Bureau of Land Management, our partner at the



DTNA, served as an Exhibit Center.

The addition of the Exhibit Center gave visitors a chance to view exhibits, review information, and shop for souvenirs without the strong sun bearing down on them. New exhibits, a freeze-dried tortoise and Mojave Rattlesnake, created great interest in all ages.



I had many congenial interactions in the Exhibit Center during times of slow visitation, allowing me to share information and get to know our visitors. The Exhibit Center created a welcoming and relaxed atmosphere. From repeat visitors, especially OHV families exclaims of, "Wow you got a new trailer," were often heard. A Naturalist is on site only 12 weeks per year, so a permanent visitor center isn't necessary, but the Exhibit Center provided a much-needed improvement for visitor interactions.

We are looking forward to the possibility of spotting hatchling tortoises in 2009. This spring a pair of un-surveyed, yet well known tortoises provided a rare opportunity to observe tortoise social behavior.



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The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.

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The Story of Pat and Franklin

In 2003 an unmarked, adult male tortoise was spotted by a small group of home-schooled students. The children named him "Franklin" after the popular T.V. turtle with the same name. Franklin has been observed frequenting the area within a quarter mile of the DTNA Interpretive Center for the last five years. This spring Franklin chose to reside about 30 feet from the Discovery Loop. He is a shy tortoise quite opposite of the gregarious female he chose to mate with this season.

A medium-sized, unmarked female was also first observed in 2003. She became "Parking Area Tortoise" or "Pat" because at the time she was using a burrow near the parking area. Pat thrived on visitor attention this spring, even seeming to pose for photographs. I watched as she "followed" two women visiting from Germany after they photographed her and as she cavorted with students from a visiting Biology class. This spring Pat dug a well-placed den deep under a Creosote bush 60 feet east of Franklin's favorite burrow. Pat and Franklin's pairing was first discovered in late March, when a family of OHV enthusiasts reported observing a pair of tortoises mating near the Discovery LOOP. This news was exciting! Here was the opportunity to observe a mating pair of tortoises over an entire season.

The pair was observed mating or attempting to mate several times throughout the spring. Of special interest was Pat's choice to move into Franklin's burrow for two days in April. Franklin's response was to vacate "his" burrow and he began spending his time near the Interpretive Kiosk. An old friend of the DTNA, CNN photographer Jim Hill, was filming in the area and spotted Franklin in the middle of his morning commute. Oblivious to his onlooker with a video camera, Franklin marched undeterred into the kiosk, where he eventually chose to reside for the entire month of May re-



turning to his burrow in early June. I suppose he found the kiosk to be a convenient home with ample shade and easy feeding on plants whose growth had benefited from the winter rains that had collected under the eaves of the kiosk. Franklin managed to "tolerate" visitors although he never interacted with Pat's style. Pat eventually moved back to her own burrow

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In Memory of David A. Kavanagh September 17, 1943 - September 2, 2008

Several weeks ago the DTPC mailbox contained a somber item: David's newsletter marked return to sender. The Committee was truly saddened to hear of his passing. From the Mojave Desert, the Inland Empire, the city of Pasadena, Orange County, the San Fernando valley to San Diego County: turtle organizations throughout California felt the loss of a genuine person. David was a caring soul with a smile that provided warmth and happiness to those around him.

He had a special fondness for our cold-blooded friends. He frequented many turtle organizations throughout California spreading his knowledge and concern for our state reptile, the Desert Tortoise, and other turtle and tortoise species.

David had a knack for listening to others and quietly voicing his opinion. Friend Martha (Young) Cooke stated "He had a special concern for the survival of Pacific (western) pond turtles and the Desert Tortoise, California's only two native turtle species."

David attended many Desert Tortoise Council Symposiums in Las Vegas, on occasion was known to visit the DTNA, and attended many meetings pertaining to turtles.

His presence and local support will be greatly missed by many organizations and those of us who knew him for decades.

ALIEN INVASION SUPPRESSED AT DTNA



While all species compete to survive, invasive species appear to have specific traits or combinations of specific traits that allow them to out-compete native species. Sometimes they just have the ability to grow and reproduce more rapidly than native species; often it's more complex, involving a suite of traits and interactions.

Several traits have been singled out by researchers as predictors of invasive ability. In plants, rapid growth, early sexual maturity, high reproductive output, the ability to disperse young widely, and a tolerance of a broad range of environmental conditions are all abilities that might aid an invasive plant in establishing and proliferating in a new environment.

At low population densities, it is often difficult for the introduced species to reproduce and maintain itself in a new location, but often because of human activity a species is transported to new locations a number of times before it becomes established. Repeated patterns of movement from one location to another, such as cars driving on roads and off-highway vehicles repeatedly driving off route, allow for species to have multiple opportunities for establishment.

Southern California has witnessed a massive proliferation of alien plants in the last decade and the Desert Tortoise Natural Area (DTNA) is no exception. The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee launched an offensive assault on the non-native plants flourishing along Cash Creek, a large wash in the interior of the DTNA. Three alien plant species were identified as having the potential to infest interior portions of the DTNA if left unchecked, Mediterranean mustard (*Hirschfeldia incana*), Tumble mustard (*Sisymbrium altissimum*), and Russian thistle (*Salsola tragus*). In 2006, the Committee contracted Eremico Biological Services who removed 1,500 kg of invasives invading Cache Creek.

Although the removal project of 2006 was considered a success, the

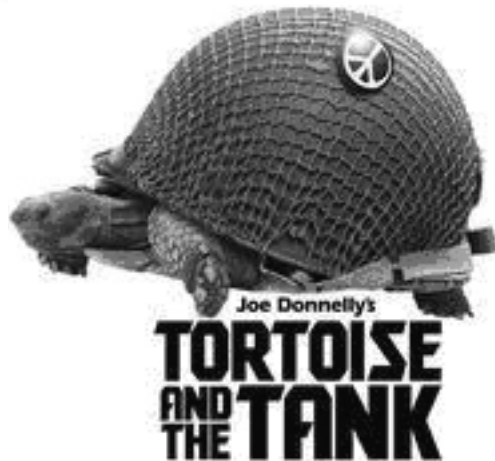
persistent, insidious behavior of invasives requires the annual monitoring and removal of new plants. This spring the Committee took part in a three-day effort to clear Cache Creek of invasives that sprouted from remaining on-site seed banks. Approximately fifty 45 gallon trash bags of alien plants were removed.

Eliminating alien species from the DTNA is extremely important for a variety of reasons. Alien species compete with native plants for limited resources. Scientific studies show that desert tortoises selectively forage on native, rather than non-native plants. Non-native species typically have low nutritional content or low ecological value for tortoises when compared to natives. Furthermore, when alien plants die they dry creating fuel for wildfires. The native flora and fauna of the Mojave Desert did not evolve under a regime where fires were widespread or frequent. The increasing occurrence of fire throughout the deserts of California is attributable to the invasion of alien plant species and can detrimentally affect desert tortoise populations.

Given the insidious behavior of these weeds, the Committee monitors Cache Creek each spring and will host an Annual Spring Invasive Removal Project (ASIRP). If you are interested in learning more about ASIRP or have a special interest or knowledge in exotic species control or removal, please contact Preserve Manager Melissa Nicholson at dtpc@pacbell.net or (951) 683-3872.

A battle in the desert over territory and resources, starring hard-shelled refugees, burger-loving insurgents and a couple of dazed road warriors

By Joe Donnelly



The Tortoise and the Tank Face Off at Fort Irwin

The Long March Home

A male, 60 or so years old by the looks of him (official designation: 166.614 2554), is on the run. Like so many refugees in this world, he's just trying to find home. But it's going to be hard. For one thing, he's in the middle of desolate and unfamiliar terrain. It's a hot day and he probably doesn't quite have his bearings just yet — understandable, considering he's been dropped off here in the middle of nowhere by helicopter. His quest for home would take him over miles of unforgiving land, rugged mountains, and expose him to harsh elements and unsympathetic predators or vehicles that could crush him without even seeing him. Not to mention, he's just not cut out for this kind of thing. He's a slow and steady sort, and watching him plod across a dry wash, one foot in front of the other, it's hard not to be a bit moved by his determination.

All the more heart-rending is the fact that, try as he might, the truth is he isn't ever going home again. The place he came from, where he lived his entire life, is fenced off. Even if his heart were really set on it, he'd make just a little more than a kilometer a day. And he probably wouldn't want to stay if he did make it, because things aren't ever going to be the same back home. His land is needed — for dubious or essential purposes, depending on your politics — by newcomers further up the food chain. I wouldn't bet against him surviving, though. His type has been around for a million years. He's a beautiful, distinguished-looking fellow ... all 15 inches of him. Did I mention he's a tortoise?

One of nearly 700 California desert tortoises, a species listed as threatened under the federal and state Endangered Species Act, number 166.614 2554 is being flown off the reservation, so to speak. Along with 40 other tortoises today, he's been dropped off in this sector of the Mojave, about 20 miles east and 10 miles north of Barstow, for relocation — away from the home he's known all of his life: Fort Irwin, California. It's all part of the first and largest military-sponsored tortoise airlift in history. Which makes him collateral damage in a war far different from the one the soldiers were preparing for in Medina Wasl. For years, the tanks of Fort Irwin and the California desert tortoise of the Western Mojave have lived together in relative peace. Recently, however, the détente has blown up, and, like many conflicts around the world, it's territorial.

See, the National Training Center at Fort Irwin needs more land. One reason is that brigade-sized training exercises involve significant man- and machine power, usually 4,000 to 5,000 soldiers, plus all their equipment — tanks, artillery, transport vehicles, armored vehicles, etc. Another significant factor is that the distance in which our armed forces can engage the enemy has increased from ranges of up to 12 miles in 1980, when the center was designated, to up to 60 miles now. Also, tactical operations move at a much quicker pace than they used to, from about a 10-mile-per-hour average to 25 miles per hour these days. Thus, the 100 Hours War, as the Persian Gulf invasion is sometimes called. Indeed, the effectiveness of Gulf War I is often credited to the training our troops did at Fort Irwin.

Unfortunately for number 166.614 2554, the land the military covets is one of the few areas where the California desert tortoise has thrived in recent decades. Now, the land has become a political and environmental battlefield. On one side, is the welfare of our soldiers, on the other, according to its defenders, is the future of one of the planet's oldest species.

LA Weekly, Published August 21, 2008: This is an excerpt from one page of this 20 page article. To view the entire article go to:

www.laweekly.com/content/printVersion/

Federal Protection Sought for Rapidly Declining Sonoran Desert Tortoises

Arizona, 10/09/08: Today, Western Watersheds Project and WildEarth Guardians filed a petition requesting that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) list the Sonoran desert tortoise population under the Endangered Species Act and designate critical habitat to protect the animal. The monitored Sonoran desert tortoise population has declined by 51% since 1987.

Severe population declines were documented in a recently completed report. The study found that monitored desert tortoise populations are declining by about 3.5% per year throughout southwestern Arizona. Although to the untrained eye they may look similar, Sonoran desert tortoises show marked genetic and behavioral differences from tortoises found in the Mojave Desert. The Mojave Desert population was listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act in 1990.

“In 1990, when the Mojave population of desert tortoises was listed, the USFWS declined to list desert tortoises east of the Colorado River on the grounds that they were less imperiled than their Mojave cousins. The dramatic declines we’ve seen in Sonoran Desert tortoise populations since then now require swift action by the federal government,” stated Dr. Michael Connor of Western Watersheds Project.

“Federal protection for the Sonoran desert tortoise is long overdue. The Service needs to list this endangered creature promptly so that it can board the legal ark the Endangered Species Act provides,” stated Dr. Nicole Rosmarino of WildEarth Guardians.

The petition catalogues many threats that contribute to tortoise declines including disease, livestock grazing, mining, urban sprawl, use of off-road vehicles, border patrol activities, and a lack of adequate legal protections. Extended drought caused by climate change is an additional threat. Biologists fear that human activities combined with environmental stress may be increasing

susceptibility to two diseases that are now becoming increasingly common among Sonoran desert tortoise populations. A disease epidemic led to emergency federal protection for tortoises in the Mojave Desert in 1989. Stated Connor, “The combined assault of threats such as development, cattle grazing, and disease are pushing Sonoran desert tortoises closer and closer to extinction.”

If listed under the Endangered Species Act, Sonoran desert tortoises would be protected from “take” (including killing and harassment) of individual tortoises and the USFWS would have to develop a recovery plan to map out the steps that must be taken to reverse the declines. The USFWS would also have to identify critical habitat required by the tortoise so that it can be protected to aid the conservation and recovery of the species.

The Endangered Species Act requires the Service to issue an initial finding on the petition within 90 days.

WildEarth Guardians and Western Watersheds Project are region-wide conservation organizations offices throughout the west including Arizona.

Pat and Franklin continued from pg 3

and remained there the majority of the season. One morning she paid a visit to Franklin at the kiosk. She eyed him for half an hour before she left the area. By residing in the kiosk, Franklin afforded the Naturalists an opportunity to observe detailed desert tortoise behavior on a daily basis. He often started his day by moving into the sun as it approached his sleeping position. Sometimes he rose early or waited until late in the morning or late afternoon to feed. For one week he hardly moved for several days. In late May the DTNA received a well-deserved spring shower. Franklin took full advantage of this boon, venturing out for a full-body soak and to drink water collecting in puddles. It was a joy to watch this elderly tortoise enjoying a rainstorm so rare in the harsh, dry desert.

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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:

Calendar of Events

January 10th: Executive Board meeting of the California Turtle and Tortoise Club.

January 17-19th: The California Native Plant Society's 2009 Conservation Conference: Strategies and Solutions. For more information please visit the CNPS homepage (www.cnps.org).

January 24th: The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee's 34th Annual Banquet held in Lancaster, California. For more information please call (951) 683-3872 or e-mail dtpc@pacbell.net

February 19-22nd: The 34th Desert Tortoise Council Annual Meeting and Symposium. Visit www.deserttortoise.org for more info.

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What are these students from Lancaster High School talking about? Check your winter issue of Tortoise Tracks to learn more.

