
Tortoise Tracks

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.

Summer 2009 29:2

Dr. Kristin Berry leads Flower Hike at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area

We left the Interpretive Center of the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area (DTNA) shortly after 9:00 a.m. for a Wild Flower Hike in the western Rand Mountains. There were 15 participants. Hikers came from as close as neighboring California City and as far as Grand Rapids, Michigan, Ashland, Oregon, and British Columbia.

Our first stop was at the fenced restoration plots at Camp C to discuss the results of seeding and use of vertical and horizontal mulch to enhance the germination of annuals. The ground was carpeted with green, primarily by the alien annuals, filaree (*Erodium cicutarium*) and Arab grass (*Schismus* sp.). Some natives were also in bloom: alkali gold-fields (*Lasthenia californica*), Fremont Phacelia (*Phacelia fremontii*), hill lotus (*Lotus hemistratus*), woody bottle-washer (*Camissonia boothii*), California mustard (*Guillenia lasiophylla*), and pepper grass (*Lepidium flavum*). Several species in the Borage family (Boraginaceae) were blooming or in fruit including the forget-me-nots and comb-burs. The hill lotus and woody bottle-washer are

among favored desert tortoise food plants. Juvenile tortoises eat the forget-me-nots.

While at Camp C, we observed a flock of sheep grazing on the wildflowers. Sheep are excluded from the fenced DTNA and from the Camp C restoration plots because of the impact to native plants and annuals.



Photo by Kathryn Nicholson

We hope all newly acquired lands within the eastern expansion of the DTNA can be fenced to exclude grazing.

In late morning we arrived at the ridge of the Rand Mountains. Here we could see the Kiavah Mountains and Owens Peak in the far



Forget-me-nots Photo by Melissa Nicholson



Davy's gilia (*Gilia latifolia*)
Photo by Melissa Nicholson



Dr. Berry describing the area's geographical features to hike participants
Photo by Melissa Nicholson

distance to the northwest; the El Paso Mountains, Koehn Dry Lake and the Fremont Valley to the north; Jawbone Canyon, Red Rock Canyon State Park, and Tehachapi Mountains to the west; and California City, Soledad Mountain and Antelope Valley to the south. The day was beautiful.

We hiked along the ridge of the mountains following an old motorcycle trail. The creosote bushes (*Larrea tridentata*) were in bud and bloom, burro bushes (*Ambrosia dumosa*) and spiny hopsage (*Grayia spinosa*) were in bloom or in fruit, and Mojave asters (*Xylorhiza tortifolia*) were covered with lavender flowers. The indigo bushes (*Psoralea argophylla* var. *minutifolia*) and California buckwheat (*Eriogonum fasciculatum*) were in leaf but not yet in bloom.

While walking this old track we were lucky enough to see two adult tortoises. One had been encountered previously by desert tortoise surveyors on a study plot within the DTNA. It had been marked in the spring of 2003 and had travelled about 3.5 miles from the last known location. Desert dandelions and snake's head were common (*Malacothrix glabrata*, *M. coulteri*). One of the little loco-



One of two tortoises observed during the hike
Photo by Jane McEwan



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The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.
Founded 1974

Preserve Manager and Office Administrator
Melissa Nicholson

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Mojave Aster (*Xylorhiza tortifolia*)
Photo by Mark Bratton



Lacy Phacelia (*Phacelia tanacetifolia*)
Photo by Mark Bratton



Snake's Head (*Malacothrix coulteri*)
Photo by Melissa Nicholson

weeds (*Astragalus didymocarpus*), commonly eaten by the tortoises, was blooming.

When we entered the canyons, more flowers were in bloom. The shaded walls and north facing slope provided a more mesic environment for the flowers. The cheesebushes (*Hymenoclea salsola*), paperbag bushes (*Salazaria mexicana*), Acton encelias (*Encelia actoni*) were in bloom, along with Mojave asters, and other shrubs. Lavender lacy phacelias (*Phacelia tanacetifolia*), white fiesta flowers (*Pholistoma membranaceum*), and several species of blazing stars (*Mentzelia* spp.) were blooming in the creosote bushes. In the shade of rocks and shrubs on the east facing slopes of the canyon, the Torrey eucrypta and small-flowered eucrypta (*Eucrypta chrysanthemifolia* var.

bipinnatifida, *E. micrantha*) were blooming. The floor of the wash was scattered with Pringle and Wallace eriophyllum (*Eriophyllum pringlei*, *E. cei*), Bigelow coreopsis (*Coreopsis biglovii*), Fremont xerasid (*Syntrichopappus fremontii*), chia (*Salvia columbariae*) and desert star (*Monoptilon bellidifforme*). Desert dandelions and snake's head were common.

At the bottom of the canyon, we walked to the waiting cars and drivers who ferried us back to our



Desert Dandelions (*Malacothrix glabrata*)
Photo by Melissa Nicholson

vehicles. Many thanks to Laura Stockton, Chuck Hemingway, and Melissa Nicholson who spent half the trip with us and then returned to the cars to drive to the pick-up point.

A Note on California's Wild Places

By Marisa Calderon of The Wilderness Society

California's desert region is home to some of the most spectacular wild places, yet many areas are not yet protected. These places include rugged mountain peaks that are home to the desert bighorn sheep, colorful striped canyons, and vast bajadas where the desert tortoise resides. As pressure to develop our pristine public lands increases, the effort to save these last wild places has intensified.



The Castle Mountains, Photo by David Lamfrom

For many years, a broad coalition of community leaders, business owners, grassroots activists and other organizations have been working to permanently protect areas in the California Desert for future generations by seeking federal wilderness legislation for these special places.

Protecting these beautiful wild places provides benefits to both people and wildlife. Preserving nearby wild areas provides recreational opportunities for desert residents to hike, horseback ride, photograph, bird watch, camp, rock climb, hunt and to experience the peace and tranquility provided

by our wild lands. Protected wild places also provide scenic backdrops, sunsets, and dark night skies.

In San Bernardino County, these areas include places like the Cady Mountains, Soda Mountains, Avawatz Mountains, additions to the Kingston Range and Golden Valley Wilderness Areas, and Castle Mountains. All of these wild areas have desert tortoise populations.

One of the many ways the desert campaign seeks to initiate grassroots support is through offering and leading hikes into many of the proposed areas. An April hike in the Kingston Range included an up-close view of several flowering plants including the giant nolina, beavertail cactus and creosote.

On a recent hike out in the Soda Mountains hikers saw several desert tortoise burrows outside of what is considered critical habitat, but with active desert tortoise populations nonetheless. Over the years, human encroachment and continuing climate change have prompted movement outside of critical habitat areas extending the desert tortoise presence into many of the proposed wilderness areas.

Wilderness designation for the proposed areas will connect existing habitat areas for the desert tortoise between proposed and currently protected wilderness. These habitat corridors allow for species to adapt to environmental or other changes and move protected within the areas they currently occupy. Without these wilderness designations, the desert tortoise and other desert vegetation and wildlife living in the proposed areas are at increased risk.

For information on upcoming hikes or to find out how you can help save the wild desert tortoise and other desert creatures, please contact Marisa Calderon with The Wilderness Society at 702-279-8108 or mlcalderon@msn.com.

Scientific Consultations
Restored Under the ESA

On April 29, 2009, Secretary of Commerce Gary Locke and Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar announced that the two departments were revoking an 11th hour Bush Administration rule that undermined the Endangered Species Act (ESA) protections. Their decision requires federal agencies to once again consult with federal wildlife experts at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration - the two agencies that administer the ESA - before taking any action that may affect threatened or endangered species.

"By rolling back this 11th hour regulation, we are ensuring that threatened and endangered species continue to receive the full protection of the law," Salazar said. "Because science must serve as the foundation for decisions we make, federal agencies proposing to take actions that might affect threatened and endangered species will once again have to consult with biologists at the two departments."

"For decades, the Endangered Species Act has protected threatened species and their habitats," said Commerce Secretary Gary Locke. "Our decision affirms the administration's commitment to using sound science to promote conservation and protect the environment."

In March, President Obama directed the Secretaries to review the previous Administration's Section 7 regulation of the ESA - which governs interagency consultation - and Congress, in the 2009 Omnibus Appropriations Act, specifically authorized the Secretaries to revoke the regulation.

The two departments will conduct a joint review of the 1986 consultation regulations to determine if any improvements should be proposed. The ESA was signed into law in 1973 to protect imperiled species from extinction, as well as conserve the ecosystems necessary for their survival.

(Rewrite source: USFWS List Server, April 29, 2009.)

Changes in Survey Guidelines
Issued by the USFWS

Survey protocols and guidelines issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have changed. The new guidelines for listed and endangered species in the Pacific Southwest Region can be found at http://www.fws.gov/ventura/speciesinfo/protocols_guidelines/.

Individuals conducting desert tortoise surveys should be aware of all changes made to survey guidelines,

Documents pertinent to desert tortoise monitoring include:

2009 Pre-Project Field Survey Protocol for Potential Desert Tortoise Habitats

Authorized Biologist and Monitor Responsibilities and Qualifications

Desert Tortoise Authorized Biologist Request Form

Permit Statement Pertaining to High Temperatures for Handling Desert Tortoises

Transmitter Records Database

Transmitter Form Metadata

Exclusion Fence Guidelines

Survey protocols are also available for the following species in the Pacific Southwest Region: Arroyo Toads, California Red-legged Frogs, Coastal California Gnatcatchers, Least Bells Vireos, Moor Shoulderband Snails, Quino Checkerspot Butterflies, San Joaquin Kit Foxes, Santa Cruz Long-toed Salamanders, Southwestern Willow Flycatchers, and Vernal Pool Brachiopods.

Spring Work Party March 28, 2009



Debbie Beckett, Sonny Poremba, & Dave Zantiny

On Saturday March 28, 2009, a group of dedicated volunteers met at the Interpretive Center of the Desert Tortoise Natural Area to spend the day volunteering on behalf of the desert tortoise. The group caravanned to Camp C to continue the DT-PC's ongoing restoration efforts in the area. Tasks accomplished included watering at Camp "C" and the large-scale collection of vertical mulch.

At Camp C the benefits of a year of protective fencing (installed late in 2007), winter



Recovering OHV trail within Camp C

rains in 2008, and restoration efforts are becoming apparent even to the casual observer. Many plant species are beginning to return to the area previously damaged by off-road vehicles.

DTPC 2nd Vice President Jane McEwan took advantage of the beautiful weather and ample vegetation to lead an impromptu wild flower hike.

Special thanks to the following individuals for their support, hard work, and dedication: Carrie Woods (Bureau of Land Management; Ridgecrest Field Office), Kim and Tony Vespa; Glen Baumbach; Caroline Broughan; Sonny Poremba; Debbie Beckett; Dave Zantiny; Jane McEwan; and Chuck Hemingway.

A Special Day For Sisters

Three of the participants in the Flower Hike were visiting sisters of DTPC members. "The Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area is a special place," said DTPC President Stephanie Pappas. "It has a unique mountain range and stunning desert fauna. Sharing this special place with our sisters was wonderful."



The Pappas Sisters



The Nicholson Sisters



The McEwan Sisters

"The History" by Jennifer Fujita

"No matter who you've become, your sister knows where you began, how it all started. She may be the only person who has the ability to recount every good, great, or stupid thing you've ever done. She understands the girl inside the grown-up woman you are today and that is no small thing."

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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:

Calendar of Events

August 5th-8th: The 7th Annual Turtle Survival Alliance (TSA) Symposium on Chelonian Conservation and Biology held in St. Louis, Missouri. For details on registration, program, and events visit <http://www.turtlesurvival.org>.

Saturday August 15th: CTTC Inland Empire Annual Show from 10:00 AM until 4:00 PM at the Redlands Senior Center, 111 W. Lugonia Avenue, Redlands, California. For show information call (951) 785-6991.

Saturday September 12th: CTTC TOO SLO Chapter presents the 18th Annual Turtle, Tortoise, & Reptile Show from 10:00 AM until 4:00 PM at San Luis Obispo Veteran's Memorial Building, 801 Grand Avenue, San Luis Obispo, CA. For more information contact www.tooslo.org.

October 9th-11th: Midwest Herpetological Symposium in Orland Park, Illinois. For more information visit <http://www.chicagoherp.org>.

October 17h-18th: The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee's Fall Work Party. Call (951) 683-3872 or e-mail dtpc@pacbell.net for more information.

October 17th-18th: Gaffney Chelonian Symposium in Canada. This symposium is a follow-up to the turtle symposium held at the Zoological Institute in St. Petersburg, Russia in 2003, and will be a unique opportunity to share information with researchers around the world. For more info visit <http://www.tyrrellmuseum.com/events/turtlesymp09.php>.

November 7th-8th: The Desert Tortoise Council Tortoise Handling Workshop in Ridgecrest, CA. The 2009 Workshop is already full. Please visit <http://www.deserttortoise.org/workshop.html> to be added to the waiting list.



Tortoise Tracks

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Thanks to everyone who helped make this a successful
spring at the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area.

