
Tortoise Tracks

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.

Winter 2009 29:4

by Melissa Nicholson

Two
ACE interns perfecting their
technique of vertical mulch installation



American Conservation Experience (ACE)

Camp C Restoration Project by Melissa Nicholson

Two years ago the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee (DTPC) began improvements to 32 acres of severely degraded habitat locally known as Camp “C”. The land was donated to the DTPC by the Center for Biological Diversity. With additional support from the Defenders of Wildlife, funding awarded through the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, and contributions from the DTPC

Camp “C” was fenced. After fencing, which protected the area from grazing and off-road activities, the DTPC began to seriously focus on improving the habitat within the area’s boundaries.

In December 2007 a crew of dedicated individuals worked diligently to install vertical mulch, horizontal mulch, catchments, and seeds over five acres within Camp “C”. Since then volunteer Work Parties, monthly watering sessions, meetings, and many

conference calls have focused on how best to restore the habitat in an arid landscape during a prolonged period of drought. This December served as an exciting two-year monitoring benchmark and will yield data regarding the three habitat improvement techniques implemented. The DTPC and other organizations are excited to see results of the monitoring that will be conducted in the spring of 2010.

While all of this is extremely
Continued on page 4

The Le Conte's Thrasher an Iconic Bird of the Desert

by Stephan Lorenz

The Desert Tortoise Natural Area (DTNA) does not only provide critical habitat for the desert tortoise, but also protects many other plants and animals. Among the numerous bird species found at the DTNA the Le Conte's Thrasher (*Toxostoma lecontei*) is one of the rarest and most enigmatic desert birds. It is supremely adapted to life in one of the harshest environments on earth. It rarely flies and never drinks, deriving all water from foods. Le Conte's Thrashers are often spotted running across bare ground with their tail held nearly vertical only to disappear completely within the cover of a small shrub. When not singing or foraging, birds are nearly impossible to locate, since their pale coloration blends in with their surroundings. At a glance Le Conte's Thrashers appear rather dull, like a washed out Northern Mockingbird, but after a closer look the observer notices the long decurved bill, buff crissum and obvious black tail, which is often held high. It can be told apart from other thrashers by its unspotted underparts and black eye. The closely related California and Crissal Thrasher (*T. redivivum*, *T. crissale*) are very similar, but are overall darker with more distinct facial markings and the species generally do not occur in the same habitat.

The Le Conte's Thrasher ranges from the Mojave and Colorado deserts in California and Nevada to

the Sonoran desert in Utah, Arizona and Mexico. A distinct population is found within the Vizcaino desert of west central Baja California. It is patchily distributed throughout its large range and usually found in low densities with hundreds of square miles of suitable habitat supporting few if any Le Conte's Thrasher. In addition it has declined in many areas and is considered a species of special concern by the California Department of Fish and Game.



Le Conte's Thrasher's are overall pale, but the dark tail and eye are distinctive. Birds often have their bills open and use gular fluttering to cool off, since they are residents in some of the hottest and driest environments on earth.

The Le Conte's Thrasher like many other desert birds has suffered from development and habitat degradation and appears to be especially sensitive to OHV traffic and livestock grazing, which crush vital vegetation and destroy litter and soil surface.

Le Conte's Thrashers prefer sparsely vegetated areas including desert flats, dunes and alluvial fans. Pairs typically establish territories in the barest areas where open sandy ground and scattered bushes



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The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.

Founded 1974

Preserve Manager and Office Administrator
Melissa Nicholson

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predominate. Here birds run between shrubs to seek shelter and forage by digging through leaf litter. They are not particularly choosy about their prey and catch arthropods of all sizes and rarely feed on small snakes and lizards. The best chance of spotting one of these secretive birds is during the onset of breeding from December through February when males sing for ten to twenty minutes at a time. Males perch less than three meters off the ground in brush or cacti, with tail held down, and deliver a complex song composed of dozens of phrases, including mimicry.

Both male and female participate in nest construction build a large cup nest usually within thorny desert shrubs or chollas. The nest includes a distinctive third insulating layer composed of fuzzy plant seeds, leaves or flowers and rarely includes human made materials or feathers. No other desert bird of similar size lines its nest in a similar fashion and old nests, which remain intact for up to three years, are often a good indicator of the presence of Le Conte's Thrashers. Females lay two to five bluish green eggs and complete the majority of incubation which lasts sixteen days. The altricial hatchlings remain in the nest for fifteen days and are capable of short flights fifteen days after the fledging. Males feed fledges for several more days before the young disperse.

Le Conte's Thrashers are year-round residents and even though the species is very shy it could be seen any month of the year. If you spot one of these unique birds at the DTNA please report your sighting to Melissa Nicholson <dtpc@pacbell.net>.

Judge Overturns Decision to Open Off-road Vehicle Routes That Hurt Tortoise

LOS ANGELES—An administrative law judge for the Interior Board of Land Appeals upheld the Center for Biological Diversity appeal of the Bureau of Land Management's decision to open two off-road vehicle routes in desert tortoise habitat in eastern Kern County. The Bureau's decision was tied to the flawed West Mojave Plan, which was **struck down** in federal court last year. The two routes at issue in the Rand Mountains Management Area, an area of critical environmental concern, had been closed in 2002 to protect the imperiled **desert tortoise** from destructive off-road vehicle use that was tearing up the fragile desert habitat.

In rendering its decision, the board set aside and remanded the decision to the Bureau of Land Management. As a result, the Bureau will need to reinstitute the closure of the routes and go back to the drawing board. The Bureau's 2008 decision was based on an inadequate education and permit program that provided no education and no permit tracking and merely required riders to obtain and carry a map of the Rand Mountain Management Area with information on the back. The Bureau's own monitoring over the past year has documented repeated cases in which off-roaders illegally cut fences and drove off designated routes into sensitive habitats.

"The number of illegal actions that have occurred since the education and permit program has been in place confirms the failure of the program," said Ilene Anderson, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity. "The judge agreed with us that the Bureau needs to rethink the decision to open these routes."

The Bureau fast-tracked the route opening and permit process and precluded public review of, and comment on, the shortcomings of the flawed plan. The routes are directly adjacent to the Desert Tortoise Natural Area, private conservation lands set up to protect desert tortoise in the wild.

Having survived tens of thousands of years in California's deserts, desert tortoise numbers have declined rapidly in recent years. The crash of populations is due to many factors, including disease, crushing by vehicles, military and suburban development, habitat degradation, and predation by dogs and ravens. Because of its dwindling numbers, the desert tortoise, which is California's official state reptile, is now protected under both federal and state endangered species law.

Population genetics studies have recently shown that the desert tortoise in the western Mojave desert, including the Rand Mountain tortoises, is distinctly different from its relatives to the north, east, and south. This finding sheds new light on why increased conservation is more important than ever for the animals in the western Mojave.—*Reprint, Center for Biological Diversity January 4, 2010* <www.biologicaldiversity.org/news/press>

Calendar of Events

January 30, 2010: The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee's Thirty-fifth Annual Meeting and Banquet will be held at The Palmdale Hotel in Palmdale, California. For more information please call (951) 683-3872 or e-mail dtpc@pacbell.net.

February 26th-28th 2010: Thirty-fifth Annual Meeting of the Desert Tortoise Council will be held at the Doubletree Hotel in Ontario, California. For more information please visit www.deserttortoise.org.

July 7th-12th, 2010: A symposium "Head-Starting turtles-Learning from Experience" will be part of the joint meeting of Ichthyologists & Herpetologists held in Providence Rhode Island.

exciting, the activities just described occurred over a small area. Twenty-five acres of land within Camp “C” are still in need of habitat improvement. This year the DTPC aimed for a larger amount of habitat improvement. Considering the level of damage, habitat destruction, and soil compaction at Camp “C” prior to fencing, the DTPC decided it was time to bring in a work crew to accomplish major goals.

To accomplish this considerable task, the DTPC recruited in another non-profit organization to conduct the on-the-ground habitat improvements this December. American Conservation Experience (ACE) is a conservation corps offering opportunities for both American and International volunteers to take part in challenging outdoor projects in many of the most beautiful National Parks, National Forests and wilderness areas in the Western United States. With housing based in Flagstaff, Arizona, and Santa Cruz California the ACE crews attract energetic long-term volunteers dedicated to helping restore America’s natural treasures. Only those individuals seeking a challenging position among positive, diverse, like-minded volunteers serving in the United States’ only international conservation corps are encouraged to apply.



by Melissa Nicholson

Crew cooperating to efficiently off-load mulching material

The ACE crew seemed to be a perfect fit for the DTPC’s goals at Camp “C”. A crew of eleven volunteers and one supervisor arrived at Camp “C” the first week of December for a nine-day work hitch in the Mojave Desert. Volunteers included participants from Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Switzerland, Mexico, and America. After driving in from Santa Cruz, volunteers were given a crash course in desert conservation and habitat restoration. The laborers began working with gusto in the daylight that remained.

Day one was likely an information overload for the crew. One volunteer was overheard saying, “I never thought I’d come all the way to America to plant sticks in the dirt!” By the second day the volunteers began to understand the purpose of the work they were performing

and the benefits provided by the restoration activities they implemented.

During the work effort volunteers installed approximately 200 vertical mulch installations, more than 100 horizontal mulching piles, and collected and installed rock to prevent erosion of the twenty large-scale catchments that were constructed by volunteers during the fall Work Party.



by Melissa Nicholson

Intern testing for the appropriate depth of soil decompaction

Although this particular area of the Mojave Desert hadn’t experienced a single drop of rain throughout the entirety of 2009, there was a major storm system that passed through, wreaking havoc on the crew where they camped nearby. One day, freezing rain pelted the volunteers and wind practically prevented the smaller individuals walking forward, giving them the appearance of being frozen in place. Pea-sized hail began to fall and later that evening a sand storm blew through, shredding tents and destroying the campsite. The group was forced to seek refuge at a local volunteer’s home. Just imagine 12 bedraggled youngsters showing up on your doorstep at 11:00 pm looking for a place to

stay (and not having bathed in a week). Of course they were asked to stay that night and the next as well, which they heartily accepted!

All in all it was a fabulous experience. The ACE crew completed thorough restoration of seven and a half acres of land at Camp "C". The volunteers went home to their countries of origin to spend the holidays with their families and I know one California City native that has invitations to stay the night at a dozen houses in Europe! The DTPC is looking forward to working with the group in the future, for habitat improvement at Camp "C" and for other projects that arise at the Desert Tortoise Natural Research Area .



View of a quarter-acre plot after habitat improvements have been implemented

Save the Desert Tortoise
and The Habitat in which it lives
*One environment
One simple way to care for it.....*

Workplace Giving
Support The
Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee

through payroll deduction by
Donating to EarthShare of California

Contact your human resources department to find out about your company's workplace giving program. To find out how your employer can host its own campaign;
Go to Earth Share's Web site at www.earthshare.org
The DTPC participates in the Combined Federal Campaign (CFC # 71985)

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee Invites You to Join Us At Our *35th Annual Banquet and General Meeting* January 30, 2010

The DTPC's Annual Meeting and Banquet will be held Saturday, January 30, 2010 at The Palmdale Hotel's Paragon Room, 300 W. Palmdale Blvd., Palmdale, California 93551 (661-273-1200). The afternoon Annual Meeting will feature a review of the Committee's ongoing programs and activities and plans for 2010. Speakers from a variety of agencies will give updates on important activities throughout southern California. The Banquet speaker will be Richard Dickey and the program title is *Ephemerals of the Mojave- A California Legacy*.

PROGRAM

- Annual Meeting 3:00 to 5:00 P.M.
- Social Mixer 5:00 to 6:00 P.M.
- Banquet Event 6:00 to 9:00 P.M.

Featuring: Richard Dickey "Ephemerals of the Mojave-A California Legacy"

Richard Dickey is a noted photographer of wildflowers, has spectacular photographs of Antelope Valley, Tehachapi Mountains, Red Rock Canyon, sites around the Desert Tortoise Natural Area, and Death Valley. One of his gorgeous photos is on the cover of Richard Minnich's new book, *California's Fading Wildflowers: Lost Legacy and Biological Invasions*. He also has an article with beautiful images in the latest issue of the California Native Plant Society's journal, *Fremontia*. Rick has a web site worthy of attention, www.feralflowers.com. One of his beautiful photos will be auctioned at the banquet. Rick will give us a tour through desert gardens in spring and bring awareness for the need of astute land management to ensure future blooms.

To RSVP or For Additional Information Contact:

Melissa Nicholson by calling (951) 683-3872 or E-mail dtpc@pacbell.net.

\$_____ Dinner Reservation \$35.00

\$_____ 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:

© Richard Dickey

"Ephemerals of the Mojave-A California Legacy"

January 30th, 2010



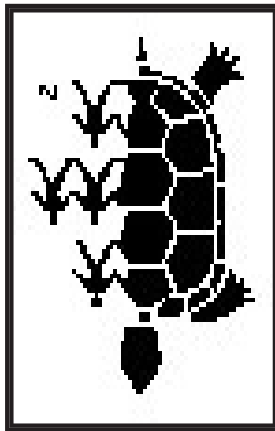


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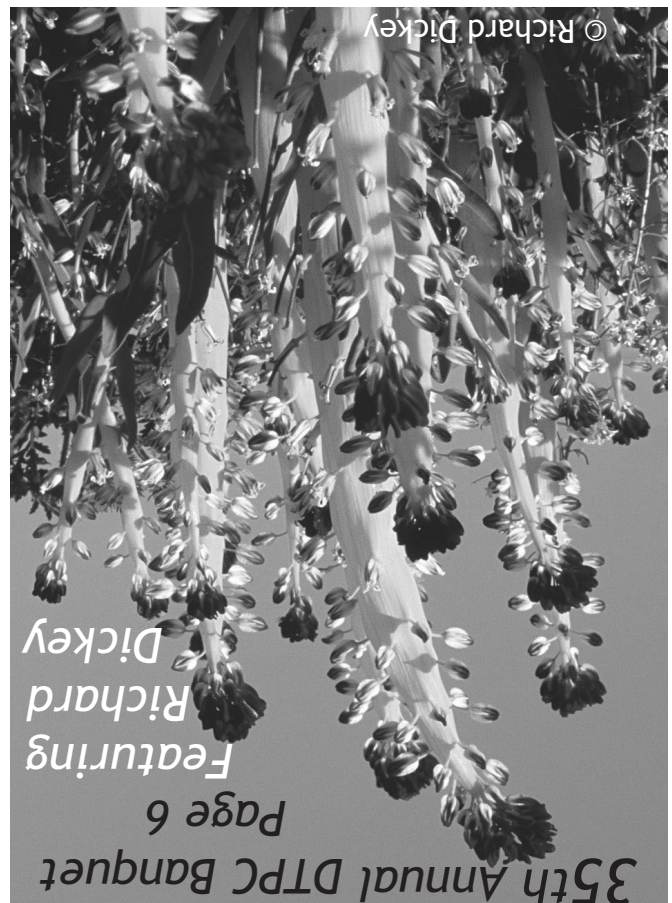


This work party will provide a great opportunity for individuals to learn more about arid land restoration and some of the techniques that are currently being employed by the DTPC to improve the habitat at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area.

Activities will include:
Watering
Seed Collection
Rock Collection
Restoration Activities
Installation of Vertical Mulch

The dates for this event are March 13-14, 2010!!
If you are interested in participating please
call (951) 683-3872 or e-mail the DTPC at
<dtppc@pacbell.net>.

**THE DESERT TORTOISE
PRESERVE COMMITTEE INVITES
YOU TO ATTEND OUR
SPRING WORK PARTY!!**



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Dickey

35th Annual DTPC Banquet
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Featuring