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# Tortoise Tracks

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The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.

Fall 2010 30:3

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## Another Fantastic Spring Season at the DTNA

Article and Photography by Robert Villa

This was my second spring as the Interpretive Naturalist at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area (DTNA) and I am happy to say that it has been another rewarding experience due to new and familiar sights and wonderful people.

Whoever said that climate is what is expected and weather is what happens never spoke truer words. This year proved to be cooler and more moist than last; which turned out to be just fine! This May I was able to make a long distance hike with a visiting friend to the northern region of the DTNA, something that would



**Desert tortoise at the DTNA**



**Unmarked desert tortoise carcass found at the DTNA**

have been stifled by last year's heat. We trekked across wide sandy washes, deep ravines, and small canyons. The trip resulted in the sighting of tortoise 212 (a large weathered male), two unmarked tortoises, and two carcasses (one of which was a juvenile with no obvious shell trauma). Also seen were blooming cacti, a large white rock outcrop that looked like a landlocked seabird island, large desert trumpets, purple mat, a few specimens of larkspur, a desert spiny lizard, some zebra-tailed lizards, a horned lizard, and several leopard lizards.

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**Blooming cacti**

Fewer reptiles and migrating bird species were seen at the DTNA this spring when compared to last. I suspect this is due to a prolonged period of winter and winter-like weather. A notable reptile sighting was a gravid (carrying developing young) sidewinder entering the DNTA on the entrance road. This is near the same location that a small juvenile was seen last year and I suspect that the DTNA entrance plot is a birthing place for at least two rattlesnakes, the latter a clearly post birthed mother Mohave rattlesnake last year near the Interpretive Center. Indeed Mohave rattlesnakes have been regularly sighted in the parking lot and latrine area in previous years. There were a few Mohave rattlesnakes seen this year, an apparent regular around Animal Loop marker 21 and a particularly irritable female was seen twice this year in the vicinity of the Main Loop.

In the way of birds, something quite unusual was seen on my way to opening the gate one morning, the head of what I've determined to be a Golden-crowned Sparrow. The remainder of the bird could not be located. It's unfortunate that a new bird to the DTNA species list is post mortem. Another new species seen were yellow-headed blackbirds.

A few annual wildflowers took center stage this year in addition to the regularly dominating gold fields: *Cryptantha* spp.; lupine; punctured bract; desert asylum; desert candle; snake-head dandelion; hill lotus; Mojave sun cups; spiny hop sage; several *Erigonum* spp.; woolly daisy; thistle sage; Mojave aster; and several species of milkvetch.

Tortoise activity and sightings seemed to be lower this year, possibly due to the weather. About sixteen individual tortoises were seen on the DTNA trails and parking lot area this season. The number is approximate because it includes confirmed visitor observations.

At least two juvenile tortoises were seen this year, including a regular to the Interpretive Kiosk. This tortoise, thought to be a male, has a burrow not far from the kiosk itself. Another juvenile was seen outside a burrow north of the Plant Loop by a visitor from Los Angeles, California.

As another season drew to an end, I'm was left with the same but more intense thoughts and feelings as last year. Growth, as with all environmental issues, I feel is underlying factor in our mission. As seemingly disparate land-use demographics reach for a shrinking commodity (land), it would seem that fuel would be added to an arguably long standing friction between generally opposing parties. But, if there's anything to be learned from *Gopherus agassizii*, it might be persistence towards dynamic adaptation and



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### The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.

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holistic conservatism. Respectful compromise must be strived for in the new generation of conservation biologists, off highway vehicle users, ranchers, agencies, and developers.

Educating the public is not just the job of Interpretive Naturalists but of all conservation biologists and scientists! This idea is making itself more manifest in all biological fields in this International Year of Biodiversity (to learn more about the International Year of Biodiversity visit [www.cbd.int/2010/welcome](http://www.cbd.int/2010/welcome)).

Ed Patrovsky was a cheerful and witty relief Naturalist and Chuck Hemingway was a helpful and gracious host in a variety of aspects. Two people deserve special mention: Laura Mogg and Charles Massieon (and their canine sidekick Peppa). Apart from being quite embracing hosts, I foresee this enthusiastic, dedicated, and active trio to be more involved in the mission of Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee. A special thanks to the Bureau of Land Management for use of a trailer for education displays, for their vigilance and support throughout the season, and for helping fund the Interpretive Naturalist position. Finally, thanks to the California City Police Department for their efforts to protect the integrity of the DTNA and maintaining a strong presence in the area.

*Special thanks to the following for their contributions to the DTPC:*

**Common Ground Corona**

**Arthur Lillund**

**Bonnie Douglas**

*Thanks to the following volunteers:*

**Steve and Marlene Ishii**

**Monica Dirac**

**Chuck Hemingway**

**Steven Orr**

**Richard Roberts**

## Springtime in the Chuckwalla Bench-Monitoring DTPC Parcels

Article and Photography by Steve Ishii



### Female tortoise in Amy's Wash

Starting in 2002, the DTPC began acquiring parcels of land in the Chuckwalla Bench Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC). The DTPC currently holds 80 acres of land in this protected area. The DTPC parcels are located in the northern part of the Colorado Desert, just south of Joshua Tree National Park. While temperatures in the Colorado Desert are generally higher than those of the Mojave Desert, mild weather in early spring provides pleasant weather for some great field days.

On April 3<sup>rd</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>, my wife, Marlene, and I made monitoring visits to the Chuckwalla Bench parcels. The main goals of these visits were to document the current condition of the parcels as part of the ongoing stewardship of the Chuckwalla Bench parcels, to note any outstanding issues with the parcels, and to see some tortoises!

Red Canyon Parcel. One of the Chuckwalla Bench parcels is located in the Orocopia Mountains along Red Canyon Road, the only legal vehicle corridor transecting the Orocopia Mountains Wilderness Area. The DTPC's 20-acre parcel features rocky terrain typical of the Orocopia Mountains, with the western border of the parcel ending at a steep drop-off into Red Canyon. Due to the rugged na-

ture of the terrain, the vegetation is sparse on the rocky hill tops and fairly thick along the small drainage channels. The majority of the animal activity in this area appears to occur in these small channels.

**Tortoise Activity.** We were not fortunate enough to see any tortoises out and about in this parcel. We did find a fragmented tortoise shell and a large tile from a tortoise shell that appeared to be fresh. While it is sad to see evidence of deceased tortoises, it is encouraging to see that the area still provides suitable tortoise habitat. We observed tortoise tracks in the small channels and a few burrows potentially used by tortoises. Along with the evidence of tortoise activity in the area, we also saw golden eagles, quail, and lizards. The highlight of our visit to this parcel was our encounter with a western diamondback rattlesnake in one of the small washes!

**Human Activity.** Red Canyon Road runs through this parcel and is a popular off-road trail. During our visit, a group of approximately a dozen off-road vehicles crossed through the parcel on Red Canyon Road. Despite the traffic on Red Canyon Road, there is no evidence of cross-country travel within the parcel; likely due to the rocky terrain presenting a tire hazard to vehicles leaving Red Canyon Road. Thanks to the rugged and remote nature of this area, there is very little evidence of human activity within the parcel. We observed only a few sahara mustard plants within the parcel and during



**Wash running through Red Canyon**

our trip along Red Canyon Road – nowhere near the infestation levels that have ruined the habitat in popular OHV areas like the one located near Anza Borrego Desert State Park. Other evidence of human activity within the parcel included a few empty cans and .50 caliber cartridges which we collected.

**Amy's Wash Parcels.** The remaining two DTPC Chuckwalla Bench

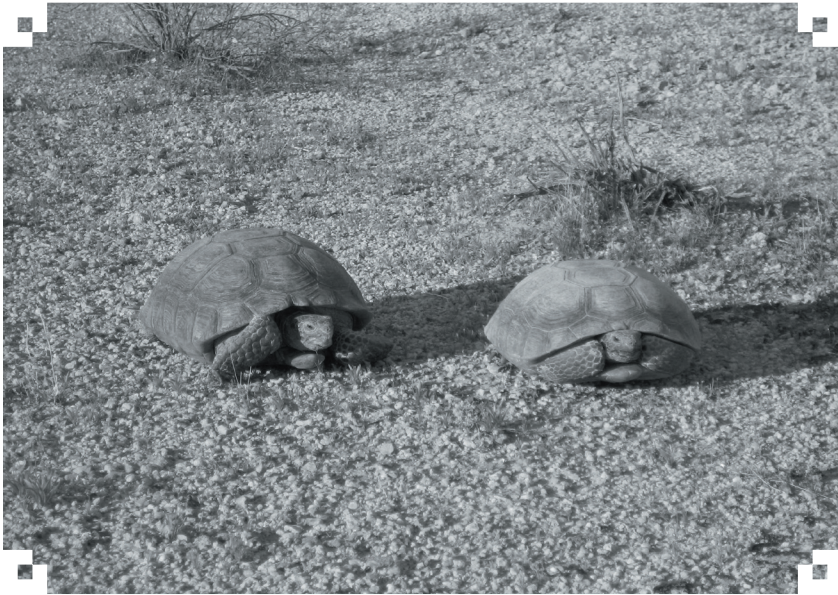


**Adult female-looks hot, tired, and hungry**



parcels are located along Amy's Wash in the alluvial fan that slopes gently away from the southern section of the Orocopia Mountains, to the sandy Salt Creek bed. The soft, rich soil in this fan area supports plenty of vegetation in the 60-acres of DTPC holdings, making it an ideal habitat for the desert tortoise. The vegetation within the parcels is typical of this part of the Colorado Desert: ocotillos, creosotes, yuccas, barrel cactus, beavertail cactus, assorted desert flowers and trumpet plants. Along with Amy's Wash, there are plenty of small drainage channels cutting across the parcels. Judging by the amount of animal tracks existing in them, these washes and channels are popular with the area's wildlife.

**Tortoise Activity.** We were fortunate enough to see five tortoises in the Amy's Wash area! One of these, an adult female, was located on DTPC land. The remaining four, two adult males and two adult females were located a little south of the DTPC parcels. All of the tortoises appeared to be in good health, with no visible signs of predator or human damage. The male and female we found together was an encouraging sign! Along with our tortoise sightings, we also found a few empty tortoise shells and plenty of tortoise tracks within Amy's Wash and the many drainage channels. There are also numerous jack-rabbits, ground squirrels, and lizards in the area. Plenty of coyote tracks and bighorn sheep tracks also exist in



**Adult female and male desert tortoise**

Amy's Wash and drainage channels.

**Human Activity.** Amy's Wash Road runs through the DTPC parcels and is a popular route for OHV riders as it is one of the few remaining open OHV routes within the Chuckwalla Bench area. During the time we spent in the area, we saw approximately 40 OHV riders. We witnessed one rider being removed from the area by emergency personnel, were informed that another rider was missing, and stopped to help a stalled Jeep that was part of this missing rider's search party. Too much OHV activity for our liking - not an encouraging sign for the preservation and recovery of the tortoise population in the area. There is some evidence of cross-country travel within the DTPC parcels, although the vehicle tracks do not appear to be fresh and it appears that re-vegetation has occurred within the tracks. Only a small scattering of Saharan mustard exists within the parcels, nothing comparable to the amount of infestation that would be present if aided by excessive cross-country travel. There were also a few empty bottles, cans and cartridges which we collected.

**Chuckwalla Future.** Our visits to the Chuckwalla Bench parcels were a great experience. We were able to spend a couple of beautiful field days in the desert, returned with plenty of written and photo documentation and saw a few tortoises. We were happy to see that the area still maintains a population of tortoises, desert plants and wildlife. Our tortoise sightings were priceless! While we were disappointed to see such a high volume of OHV activity in the area, our hope is that these riders will ride responsibly and "tread lightly" throughout the area. The DTPC's ongoing stewardship of these Chuckwalla Bench parcels will continue to provide much-needed protection for this critical desert tortoise habitat.

## Groups to Obama: Cut Livestock Subsidy to Fix Agency Budgets

July 2010

TUCSON, Ariz.— Conservation groups sent a letter to the Obama administration today detailing how the Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service can meet the president's June 8 directive to cut 5 percent from agency budgets: reform or eliminate the money-losing, habitat-destroying public lands livestock grazing program.

"Instead of trimming the budget, the agencies should start by cutting their losses," said Greta Anderson, Arizona director of Western Watersheds Project. "The fee has failed to keep pace with inflation, failed to cover even the administrative costs of operating the grazing program, and incentivizes destructive grazing practices on public land. In a time of budget crisis, it makes good economic sense to address these issues."

The two agencies charge a paltry \$1.35 monthly fee for each cow and calf that the livestock industry grazes on public land in the West. That's far below private market rates and far short of providing enough revenue to correct the ecological damage caused by grazing.

The Government Accountability Office reported in 2005 that the BLM loses \$46.5 million every year administering its grazing program. That's equal to 5 percent of the agency's 2011 budget request. The Forest Service loses at least \$69.5 million dollars a year on its grazing program, which is equivalent to more than 1 percent of its 2011 budget request.

"Reforming or eliminating the public lands livestock program would save the public's money, land, watersheds and wildlife," said Taylor McKinnon, public lands campaigns director with the Center for Biological Diversity. "It makes perfect economic and

environmental sense, and it's something the Obama administration can do quickly and easily."

In 2005, some of the same conservation groups that sent today's letter petitioned the government to reform the formula used to calculate public lands livestock grazing fees. Those groups filed a lawsuit in June 2010 after the government failed to respond to the petition.

"Given the massive budget shortfall our country is facing, we can no longer afford to subsidize a small group of ranchers to graze public lands at public expense," said Mark Salvo, director of the Sagebrush Sea Campaign for WildEarth Guardians.

The letter to Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and Interior Secretary Ken Salazar was submitted by Western Watersheds Project, WildEarth Guardians, Center for Biological Diversity, Great Old Broads for Wilderness, Ventana Wilderness Alliance, Public Lands Without Livestock and Sequoia ForestKeeper.

Contacts: Greta Anderson, Western Watersheds Project, (520) 623-1878, Taylor McKinnon, Center for Biological Diversity, (928) 310-6713, and Mark Salvo, WildEarth Guardians, (503) 757-4221 Visit <http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/index.html> for more information.

### *Audit Committee Members Needed*

The Board of Trustees is looking for members of the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc. with experience reviewing financial records who may be interested in serving on the Audit Committee. Interested parties should contact Jane McEwan at (760) 384-2615 or e-mail [mcewanmj@gmail.com](mailto:mcewanmj@gmail.com). The Audit Committee meets three times a year via conference call, so travel to meeting locations is not a requirement for participation.

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## Calendar of Events

October 16-17, 2010: The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee is hosting our annual Fall Work Party at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area. For more information e-mail [dtpc@pacbell.net](mailto:dtpc@pacbell.net) or call (951) 683-3872.

October 26-27, 2010: The Restoring the West -Managing Plants and Animal Conflicts conference will be hosted in Logan, Utah. For more information about registration and program content please visit <http://restoringthewest.org>.

November 6-7, 2010: The Desert Tortoise Council's 19th Annual Introduction to Desert Tortoise Surveying, Monitoring, and Handling Techniques Workshop will be held in Ridgecrest, California. The workshop is currently full. To be placed on the waiting list

e-mail [tortoiseorg@gmail.com](mailto:tortoiseorg@gmail.com).

January 22, 2011: The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc. will host our Annual Meeting and Banquet at the Palmdale Hotel in Palmdale, California. For more information or for advanced registration please e-mail [dtpc@pacbell.net](mailto:dtpc@pacbell.net) or call (951) 683-3872.

February 8-12, 2011: The Annual Meeting of the Western section of The Wildlife Society, will be held in Riverside, California. For more information please visit the organization's website.

February 18-20, 2011: The The 36th Annual Symposium of the Desert Tortoise Council will be held February 18-20, 2011 at Sam's Town in Las Vegas, Nevada. Registration information will be available in Fall 2010. See [www.deserttortoise.org](http://www.deserttortoise.org) for more information.





## Tortoise Tracks

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