



# Tortoise Tracks



The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.

Summer 2013 33:2

## *Taking out the Trash*

*DTPC Volunteers Come Together for Desert Clean-Up, Land Monitoring, and More at the Annual Spring Work Party*

*Article by Mary Logan*



The main project for the DTPC's annual spring work party wasn't especially glamorous—a large amount of trash that had accumulated in the unfenced conservation lands west of the [Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area](#) (DTRNA) needed to be removed—but thankfully, the volunteers still showed up! Thirty enthusiastic participants, ranging from young students to high-schoolers to seasoned desert lovers, met at the DTRNA on the morning of April 6, 2013 to help with this valuable stewardship task. After a brief introduction, we caravanned out to the work site and split into teams. Some targeted electronic waste – mainly old televisions that had been brought to the site and used for target practice, while others began installing signs along the boundaries of DTPC-owned properties to discourage future trespass. A third group monitored the southern and western fence line of the DTRNA and replaced faded boundary and informational signs. The remaining volunteers grabbed gloves and bags

and began picking up the trash that littered properties in the Western Expansion Area of the DTRNA, especially near the main dirt road running along their border.



The group made great progress throughout the day. Collectively, our volunteers removed at least 6 televisions that were later taken by [Ridgecrest BLM](#) to an electronic waste facility, installed 24 No Trespass signs around the boundaries of the unfenced conservation lands, replaced 16 faded boundary signs along the DTRNA fence line, and filled an entire 3-yard dumpster with collected trash. We were also able to get a better understanding of the remaining work that is needed to clean up the site. Unfortunately, there are still some large trash accumulations in the area and the fall work party will focus on completing the clean-up.

Littering and illegal dumping are significant [threats to desert tortoises](#) and other wildlife. Wildlife may ingest trash items or be exposed to toxic substances they contain. Trash also attracts and helps support increased

*(Continued on page 2)*



**Televisions, such as these broken and bullet-riddled sets collected during the work party, can introduce harmful substances into the environment.**

numbers of [human-subsidized predators](#) of the tortoise, such as common ravens, coyotes, and dogs. In a 2011 study of desert tortoise populations and habitats in different management areas, including the DTRNA and adjacent unfenced conservation areas, the presence of desert tortoise sign was found to be negatively correlated with the abundance of trash at different survey plots. Removing trash and implementing measures to prevent future dumping are essential to improving the habitat quality for the tortoise. Thus, while the work may not be glamorous, it is incredibly important. Thank you so much to all of our volunteers!

An additional thank you to everyone who joined us on the second day of the work party to monitor DTPC properties in the [Pilot Knob](#) area. After camping at the Crawford Cabin site on Saturday night, ten of us gathered for an introduction to land monitoring. DTPC member, **Steve Ishii**, provided the training, as well as a handbook for land monitors, and we broke into teams to monitor a one square mile parcel located just northeast of Grass Valley Wilderness. Each team navigated to two corners of the parcel and documented vegetation, wildlife, and management concerns in and around the property. This was chal-

lenging at times, as the eastern edge of the parcel includes the steep slopes of the Black Hills! The teams reunited for lunch and monitored other sites of interest in the area before returning home. The excursion was a productive one—we collected important data on the condition of DTPC conservation lands and trained new volunteers, now ready to independently monitor lands in the future.

The DTPC would like to acknowledge all of the wonderful volunteers who helped us over the weekend: **Chuck Hemingway, Dave Zantiny, Chris Herbst, David Logan, Mark Bratton, Laura Stockton, Bob Parker, Allan Eggleston, Steve & Marlene Ishii, Miss Lily Parsons, Leigh O'Key, Gavin Sloan, Owen O'Key, Kolene Dearmore, Hanna Strauss, Tyler Schappe, Laura Mogg, Charlie Massieon, Craig Bansmer, Bonny Ahern, Sara Hanner, Glen Baumbach, Kyanni Reise, Andrea Sandoval, Teresita Sandoval** (daughter) and **Teresita Sandoval** (mother), **Heriberto Sandoval, Karina Sandoval**, and **Will Liebscher**. We are also very grateful to [Tread Lightly!](#) for providing funds to support this important stewardship event, and to **Ruby Allen** of [Ridgecrest Bureau of Land Management](#) for helping us properly dispose of the collected electronic waste.



One of the DTPC's important field activities is removal of trash during fall and spring work parties. While the amount of trash within the fenced portion of the [Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area](#) (DTRNA) is minimal, some concentrated areas still exist and need to be cleaned up. In the as yet unfenced Natural Area expansion areas to the west and east, trash—both old and recent—is a major issue. Why? We know from recent studies conducted by **Dr. Kristin Berry** at the DTRNA and adjacent lands that trash counts are high in the expansion areas. Also, tortoises and tortoise sign (scats, tracks, burrows, courtship rings, drinking sites) are low to non-existent in areas with moderate to high trash counts. Similar studies conducted elsewhere in the desert in such areas as Antelope Valley and near El Mirage Dry Lake by Drs. Berry and **James Weigand** and **Kevin Keith** have produced similar results. The relationship between trash and low or no tortoise sign may be the result of multiple types of human activities (camping, fire rings, areas denuded of vegetation, vehicle tracks) that are incompatible with tortoises. Tortoises also may be eating trash, which turtles and tortoises are known to do and has been documented by veterinarians. Pieces of balloons, aluminum foil, paper and other objects can lodge in the gut and result in illness or death. Armed with this knowledge, the DTPC hopes that our volunteer efforts will result in eliminating trash from the Natural Area and expansion areas, thus improving habitat for the desert tortoise.



Interpretive Naturalist, Hanna Strauss, conducting educational outreach at California City's Desert Tortoise Days

## A Drought's Hidden Treasures

Article by Hanna Strauss

My initiation into the position of Naturalist at the [Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area](#) (DTRNA) for 2013 presented itself with some unique challenges. When I was initially offered this opportunity, I looked forward to becoming immersed in the springtime activities of the denizens of the northwestern Mojave Desert. Unfortunately, this season has proven to be one of the driest in the past ten years.

When I arrived on my first day to work at the DTRNA the first thing I noticed was the conspicuous absence of sprouting springtime annual plants. I knew this would have a profound influence on desert tortoise activity above the ground. From spending previous years working and camping in this region, I was quite aware how colorful the landscape can be when it is carpeted with goldfields, Mojave asters, phacelia, desert dandelions, apricot mal-low, and pincushion, all species included in the springtime [diet of the desert tortoise](#). None of these plants were present. This meant there would be a paucity of desert tortoise sightings, and in the end, only three or four individuals appeared near the DTRNA Interpretive Center with a fair amount of regularity this season.

I relied on my acquired knowledge of other species found in the northwestern Mojave Desert that share the desert tortoise's habitat to fill voids created by their absence. I have learned from previous field experience that just because you don't see them, doesn't mean they're not there. The point I wish to emphasize here is that other species present in the DTRNA can be interesting and offer themselves as resources of unique data via anecdotal observations. Since the insectivorous lizards were far more ubiquitous, I recorded some notes on their behaviors. Some people overlook the small and numerous side-blotched lizards (*Uta stansburiana*). I followed the social interactions of some individuals inhabiting burrows under creosote bushes in the Visitor's Center. One morning, I watched a dominant blue throated male drive off another male from its territorial boundaries. After getting rid of the rival he promptly headed over to a female basking near by and repeatedly copulated with her.

The western whiptails (*Aspidoscelis tigris*) were active and numerous. Their body conditions overall appeared excellent; good fat storage was evident in their tail bases. Apparently in spite of the drought, there was more than adequate invertebrate life available to keep these lizards well fed. Whiptails aren't too fussy about their prey items and I was able to get some nice photos of one at the Visitor's Center devouring an adult Pepsis wasp (also known as a tarantula hawk). I stumbled upon this observation while rushing back to the trailer to get the GPS Unit to record my one and only sighting this spring of an active [Mohave ground squirrel](#) (*Xerospermophilus mohavensis*).



Photo by: H. Strauss  
A western whiptail with its prey, a tarantula hawk (*Pepsis* sp.)



Photo by: H. Strauss  
A well-camouflaged desert horned lizard waits on an ant mound for prey.

Since there were also plenty of harvester ant colonies, the desert horned lizards (*Phrynosoma platyrhinos*) were also thriving. I admired intelligence of one individual as it parked itself on an ant mound to bask so it could engage in a leisurely snack whenever an ant would venture above ground. Another bold horned lizard chased harvester ants between my feet as I stood nearby watching. I also witnessed a long-nosed leopard lizard (*Gambelia wislizenii*) stalking a western whiptail beneath a paperbag bush (*Scutellaria mexicana*). While I was entering data on the computer one morning in the

trailer I noticed the telltale signature of a serpent's motion out of my peripheral field of vision. I hastily exited the trailer to encounter a red coachwhip snake (*Masticophis flagellum piceus*) hunting side-blotched lizards. It hid in a rodent burrow under a creosote bush and would periscope its head out looking for breakfast. It finally managed to grab an unfortunate one with lightning speed--far too quick for the lizard to have time to react to the snake's strike. The coachwhip then retreated with its quarry back into the hole to enjoy its meal in privacy.

Not to exclude the few desert tortoise sightings this season, I had to admire the fortitude and perseverance of the tortoises I observed active and making the best of less-than-ideal conditions. This spring,

Photo by M. Logan



Male # 589 feeding on grasses growing near the Educational Kiosk.

we observed marked individuals numbers 1056, 589, and 1067 most frequently. Using their incredible long-term memories, they capitalized on the availability of the limited plants found growing around the latrine and kiosk. Though these plants were not preferred foods, the tortoises staved off their hunger grazing on non-native filaree (*Erodium cicutarium*) and *Schismus* and *Bromus* grasses. This activity actually facilitated desert tortoise observations by visitors to the DTRNA, who were happy to spot the species near the Visitor's Center.

observed some off-site, I saw no evidence of surface activity during any of the walks I took at the DTRNA, day or night. I would deliberately check to see if one might be coiled up resting under a creosote bush. The only other species of snake I observed and documented was a Mojave patch-nosed snake (*Salvadora hexalepis mohavensis*) basking on the Discovery Trail. I also found tracks produced by smaller snakes, possibly Mojave Shovelnose Snakes (*Chionactis occipitalis occipitalis*) and/or Spotted Leafnose Snakes (*Phyllorhynchus decurtatus*) on the Entrance Road. Ironically, having not seen one Crotaline (rattlesnake) species indigenous to the DTRNA, I managed to spot their botanical namesake sprouting on the Plant Loop. A patch of rattlesnake weed (*Chamaesyce albomarginata*) appeared a couple of days after a slight rainfall flourishing amidst dormant shrubs and standing litter.

Mojave rattlesnakes (*Crotalus scutulatus*) are often seen in the spring at the DTRNA, but I did not encounter any this season. While I ob-



Patches of perennial rattlesnake weed provided glimpses of green in a very dry landscape this spring. Photo by: H. Strauss

In closing, I wish to encourage everyone to visit and explore the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area, regardless of the seasons and their conditions. There is something to be learned from what you might observe as well as what you may not see relative to climatic variations. All it takes is an open, observant mind, patience and curiosity.

**You just never know what hidden natural history treasures you may discover!**

*The DTPC would like to thank our Interpretive Naturalists, **Hanna Strauss** and **Lisa LaVelle**, for their dedication and enthusiasm this spring, as well as our volunteers who helped out this season. We are extremely grateful to the [Bureau of Land Management](#) and the [Great Basin Institute](#) for providing substantial funding for the Naturalist Program, and to our members, whose contributions also support the program. Finally, thanks to the hundreds of individuals and groups who visited the DTRNA this spring--we hope to see you again!*



Relief Naturalist, Lisa LaVelle, recording the location of a desert tortoise burrow.

## Federal Court to Trespass Grazer in Nevada: "Get Your Cattle Off — Now!"

LAS VEGAS— The U.S. District Court of Nevada has issued a [ruling](#) that affirms, once again, the right of the federal Bureau of Land Management to remove cattle trespassing in southeastern Nevada's Gold Butte area to protect [desert tortoises](#), other imperiled species, ancient cultural resources, and the safety of the recreating public. The decision affirms a previous finding by the same court, made in 1998 and later upheld on appeal.

"Gold Butte is a national treasure, and is being considered for designation as a national monument or conservation area," said Rob Mrowka, a Nevada-based ecologist with the Center for Biological Diversity. "It's high time for the BLM to do its duty and give Gold Butte and its resources the respect and protection they deserve."

Beginning in 1993, the BLM has been in dispute with grazer Cliven Bundy over his right to graze the Bunkerville Allotment of the Gold Butte area. After the BLM terminated Bundy's grazing permit for failure to pay fees in 1998, Clark County, as administrator for the Clark County Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan, purchased the grazing rights from the BLM for \$375,000 and retired them, in order to fulfill requirements under that plan to protect endangered desert tortoises.

Despite having no legal right to do so, cattle from Bundy's ranch have grazed throughout the Gold Butte area, competing with tortoises for food, hindering the restoration of extensive wildfires, trampling rare plants, damaging ancient American Indian cultural sites, and threatening the safety of recreationists. Surveys by the BLM have found well over 1,000 cattle — many in easily damaged freshwater springs and riparian areas on public lands managed by the National Park Service and state of Nevada as well as the BLM.

In April 2012, after the BLM inexplicably stopped a roundup of trespassing cattle under the 1998 court ruling, the Center sent a 60-day [notice](#) of intent to sue the agency, along with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Clark County, Nev., under the Endangered Species Act for their failure to protect endangered species according to the terms of a "biological opinion" for the habitat conservation plan. Shortly afterwards, the BLM initiated the case that resulted in this ruling.

"The court has provided the BLM with a clear and undisputed mandate to proceed with what should have occurred over 12 years ago — to protect the rights of the American public by ending illegal grazing that has cost them hundreds of thousands of dollars while imperiling the protected desert tortoise. The foot-dragging by the departments of Justice and the Interior has been nothing short of outrageous."

The [Center for Biological Diversity](#) is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 625,000 members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places

To read the entire article, visit: [http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/news/press\\_releases/2013/gold-butte-08-01-2013.html](http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/news/press_releases/2013/gold-butte-08-01-2013.html)

## The DTPC would like to thank the following volunteers:

<i>Ron Berger</i>	<i>Kolene Dearmore</i>	<i>David Logan</i>	<i>Tyler Schappe</i>
<i>Dr. Kristin Berry</i>	<i>Steve &amp; Marlene Ishii</i>	<i>Charlie Massieon</i>	<i>Gavin Sloan</i>
<i>Laura Stockton</i>	<i>Sara Hanner</i>	<i>Laura Mogg</i>	<i>Hanna Strauss</i>
<i>Bob Wood</i>	<i>Chuck Hemingway</i>	<i>Leigh &amp; Owen O'Key</i>	<i>Rachel Woodard</i>
<i>Dave Zantiny</i>	<i>Allan Eggleston</i>	<i>Miss Lily Parsons</i>	<i>Carrie Woods (BLM)</i>
<i>Bonny Ahern</i>	<i>Shelley Ellis (BLM)</i>	<i>Bob &amp; Sue Parker</i>	<i>Montynne Yates (CTCC)</i>
<i>Ruby Allen</i>	<i>Chris Herbst</i>	<i>Kyanni Reise</i>	<i>Great Basin Institute</i>
<i>Craig Bansmer</i>	<i>Ed LaRue</i>	<i>Andrea, Teresita,</i>	<i>Tread Lightly!</i>
<i>Glen Baumbach</i>	<i>Lisa LaVelle</i>	<i>Heriberto, Karina &amp; Te-</i>	
<i>Mark Bratton</i>	<i>Will Liebscher</i>	<i>resita Sandoval</i>	

## DTPC Calendar of Events

**September 7, 2013:** DTPC Board Meeting, California City, CA

**October 12-13, 2013:** Fall Work Party / Desert Clean Up, DTRNA

**December 14, 2013:** DTPC Board Meeting, DTPC Office, Riverside, CA

**January 25, 2014:** Annual Meeting & Banquet, Palmdale, CA

More information for each event can be found by calling (951) 683-3872 or sending an email to [dtpc@pacbell.net](mailto:dtpc@pacbell.net).

Additional information can be found on the DTPC's website [www.tortoise-tracks.org](http://www.tortoise-tracks.org) and Facebook [www.facebook.com/dtpc.inc](http://www.facebook.com/dtpc.inc).

## **Bureau of Land Management to add California Desert Conservation Area lands to the system of National Conservation Lands**

Excerpts from *National Conservation Lands in the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan*, a briefing prepared by [The Wilderness Society](#):

### **BLM to Identify New National Conservation Lands**

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has begun a new planning process that will identify and designate certain lands in the California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA) to be added to the National Landscape Conservation System (National Conservation Lands). The CDCA is a 25-million acre area that was designated by Congress in 1976 for a variety of purposes including protection of environmental, scenic, cultural, recreational and other resources as well as for management of other multiple uses.

### **BLM's Authority to Identify National Conservation Lands**

The authority and obligation to establish areas in the CDCA that will be formally added to the National Conservation Lands was established by Congress in the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009 (Omnibus). This law made the National Conservation Lands a permanent system of public lands conservation. The Omnibus went on to define the lands that would be included in the system, which includes "public land within the California Desert Conservation Area administered by the Bureau of Land Management for conservation purposes."

Rather than defining those areas that would become part of the National Conservation Lands, Congress left it up to the agency to decide which lands in the CDCA would be identified as "administered for conservation purposes." Conversely, there are also lands within the CDCA that will be devoted to energy development, off-road vehicle use and purposes other than conservation.

### **The Process for Identifying National Conservation Lands**

The BLM is using a concurrent, overlapping planning process to identify the National Conservation Lands in the CDCA. The Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan (DRECP) is a landscape-level planning process for both renewable energy development and multiple listed and sensitive species covering 22.5 million acres of private and public lands. The underlying purpose is to help California reach its Renewable Portfolio Standard of 33% by 2020 by finding appropriate area for industrial-scale renewable energy development while also identifying landscape-level mitigation for species in the area. This process involves the BLM, US Fish & Wildlife Service, California Energy Commission, and California Department of Fish & Wildlife.

The designation of National Conservation Lands in the CDCA will take place as part of the DRECP process. Although the language of the Omnibus authorizes BLM to establish National Conservation Lands independent of the DRECP, BLM will use the opportunity of the DRECP, which requires that the CDCA plan be amended, to receive public comments and proposals for the addition of these areas to our National Conservation Lands, and to consider those designations in the broader context of planning for renewable energy development. BLM has posted preliminary alternatives for the DRECP at <http://www.drecp.org/documents/>, and expects to release a draft EIS later in 2013.

### **Criteria for Identifying National Conservation Lands**

Congress did not set any specific criteria for the identification of Desert Conservation Lands. However, the Omnibus did state that the purpose of the National Conservation Lands was to "conserve, protect, and restore nationally significant landscapes that have outstanding cultural, ecological, and scientific values for the benefit of current and future generations." BLM has already indicated that lands identified as Desert Conservation Lands must be "nationally significant" and possess those outstanding values listed in the Omnibus. This includes lands containing prehistoric or historic sites, areas with a high degree of intactness or that can be restored to that level, and lands that are valuable for scientific research, education and discovery.

### **Management Needs for the National Conservation Lands**

The National Conservation Lands in the CDCA will be managed primarily for conservation, with other uses permitted so long as they do not conflict with protection of the nationally significant values they were designated to conserve. This should conform to BLM's policy guidance for the National Conservation Lands, including Secretarial Order 3308, the 15-Year Strategy for the Conservation Lands, and BLM Manual 6100 for the management of the National Conservation Lands.

*The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc. has written to Bureau of Land Management State Director James Kenna to ask him to add the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area and several other sites important for desert tortoise conservation to the system of National Conservation Lands and we encourage our members to do the same. For more information on the National Conservation Lands in California, visit [http://www.blm.gov/ca/st/en/prog/blm\\_special\\_areas.html](http://www.blm.gov/ca/st/en/prog/blm_special_areas.html); for more information on the DRECP, visit <http://www.drecp.org/>.*

**Looking to get more involved?**

If you have a deep concern for the continued preservation of the desert tortoise and its habitat and would like to do more to help promote the welfare of the Mojave Desert, contact us at (951) 683-3872 or by email at [dtpc@pacbell.net](mailto:dtpc@pacbell.net) for details on different service committees, Board activities, and other volunteer opportunities. There are many ways to help!

DTPC is an IRS recognized tax-exempt 501 (c)(3) nonprofit corporation.



**The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.**

Founded 1974

**Board of Trustees**

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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:

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**For more information on becoming a DTPC member, you can also contact us at (951) 683-3872 or visit our website at: <http://www.tortoise-tracks.org/wptortoisetracks/become-a-member>**



# Tortoise Tracks

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## **The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.**

invites you to our

### **Annual Fall Work Party**

with a focus on removing trash from important conservation areas surrounding the

### **Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area**

Join us for one or both days

**Saturday, October 12 and Sunday October 13, 2013**

with camping and a nature walk for those interested in  
staying on Saturday evening

Please save the dates, and contact us at

**[dtpc@pacbell.net](mailto:dtpc@pacbell.net) or (951) 683-3872**

if you are interested in participating and would like more information.