



Tortoise Tracks



The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.

Fall 2014 34:3



Lisa recording the location of a desert tortoise burrow.

DTRNA—It's a wonderful place.

Article by: Lisa LaVelle

I just finished my second season as relief naturalist at the [Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area](#) (DTRNA), and this truly is a wonderful place!

Besides its main character, the [desert tortoise](#) (*Gopherus agassizii*), classified as threatened under the [Endangered Species Act](#) and also California's official state reptile, the DTRNA is home to a variety of other reptiles, as well as mammals and birds: side-blotched lizard, zebra-tailed lizard, western whiptail, desert horned lizard, long-nosed leopard lizard, gopher snake, coachwhip, sidewinder, Mojave rattlesnake, black-tailed hare, cottontail, white-tailed antelope ground squirrel, [Mohave ground squirrel](#), desert woodrat, Merriam's kangaroo rat, desert kit fox, sage sparrow, horned lark, burrowing owl, LeConte's thrasher, loggerhead shrike, ash-throated flycatcher, Say's phoebe, lesser nighthawk, just to name a few. Out on my daily nature trail walks, there was lots to explore and lots of interesting discoveries, and I hereby wish to relate one or the other wildlife encounter and experience.

The side-blotched lizard (*Uta stansburiana*), is a small sized lizard with a single dark blue to black spot on its side behind its foreleg and is quite common and numerous. I could be sure to always see some either basking in the sun or foraging for insects on the desert floor.



Basking zebra-tailed lizard
Photo by Lisa LaVelle

The larger sized zebra-tailed lizard (*Callisaurus draconoides*) is known as a swift runner and it curls its tail over its back to expose the "zebra" stripes. It actually curls and wags its tail when it becomes disturbed. This lizard eats just about anything it can get a hold of: insects, spiders, smaller lizards, and occasionally also includes flowers in its diet.

I always enjoyed watching the even larger and very agile and active western whiptails (*Cnemidophorus tigris*) as they worked the base of creosote bushes, stalking any potential prey, ranging from insects to spiders, scorpions, and, as I observed on one occasion, some fluttering leaves... They will also dig burrows not only for retreats but to find prey underground.



Western whiptail in motion
Photo by Mary Logan



You can't see me: a well-camouflaged desert horned lizard flattens itself against the sandy substrate.
Photo by Mary Logan

The flat-bodied desert horned lizard (*Phrynosoma platyrhinos*) is a master of camouflage, sitting quietly in the open, blending in so perfectly with its surroundings that I almost stepped on one on several occasions, before it suddenly dashed away.

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Though I saw these four lizard species frequently, I got to spot a long-nosed leopard lizard (*Gambelia wislizenii*) only once this season:

basking in the sun nearly motionless on top of a sandy hill next to a wash near the Visitor Center. I felt very happy of the opportunity to take some photos of this strikingly beautiful lizard.

While lizards generally make themselves very visible, snakes seem to be quite skillful in avoiding crossing paths with humans. However, I did get to have a few snake encounters this spring. Once, shortly after closing time, as I had just started my evening walk, I noticed something moving on the ground a few feet away. Looking more closely, I observed a gopher snake investigating rodent holes, and entering one after about twenty minutes. Another time, after 8 pm while sitting outside, I watched another gopher snake (or maybe the same individual?) crawling from under the Naturalist trailer and leisurely making its way towards and under the Discovery trailer, on its way northeast out in the desert.



The following morning, as I inspected exhibits along the nature trails, I startled a coachwhip basking on the desert floor. Unfortunately, I didn't get to have a good look at it because it darted away with nearly lightning speed and disappeared into a hole under a creosote bush. I never actually came across a Mojave rattlesnake or sidewinder on any of my shifts, but I did see the typical parallel "JJJ"-shaped sidewinder tracks in a wash.

Once in while I observed a black-tailed hare (*Lepus californicus deserticola*) and also some antelope ground squirrels, although I was never caught a glimpse of a [Mohave ground squirrel](#) (*Xerospermophilus mohavensis*). I did have a rather amusing moment with a Merriam's kangaroo rat: one evening while sitting in a chair outside the trailer; that rat suddenly came out from under a creosote bush behind the Discovery trailer and run across the Visitor Center straight towards my chair and shot right between my legs under the trailer and out the other side! All that happened so fast that I almost had to pinch myself to be sure it really did. But what a cute kangaroo rat that was!

I greatly enjoyed all these encounters, but any desert tortoise sighting was a special highlight. Slightly more rainfall last summer, fall, and late winter resulted in the emergence of some "green stuff", meaning the annual grasses and flowers on which desert tortoises depend on for food (last year there was virtually none). So, visitors and naturalists got to observe tortoises fairly frequently this spring, especially near and along washes where the concentration of plants is higher than in the adjacent desert. Sometimes tortoises also came to visit the Visitor Center looking for food.



The adult male #1056 showed up several times. One Sunday afternoon around 3:45 PM, I watched him make his way to the Discovery trailer, resting in its shade for a while, and then he walked straight towards the Naturalist trailer and the chair where I was sitting. He watched me for a few minutes before moving on to the Latrine, munching

(Continued on page 3)

on some filaree (*Erodium cicutarium*) and then resting again in the shade. After 5:00 PM, he walked and foraged all along the rock border of the parking lot, then turned to the north and headed towards the Interpretive Kiosk, feeding and resting from time to time, and then turned to cross the [Main Loop](#). Finally, around 6 PM, he entered a burrow little ways North of the Kiosk. And all along the way he seemed to know exactly where he was going. It was amazing!



Male 1056 getting a bite to eat!
Photo by Mary Logan

In conclusion, I would like to encourage everyone to take the time and visit the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area – enjoy and discover – and please know that, as a visitor recently told me, “Even though I did not get to see a tortoise here today, this is a very wonderful place.”



Volunteer Allan Eggleton manning the DTPC booth at California City's Desert Tortoise Days

Strangers In The Night

Three remote sensing cameras installed around the Interpretive Center captured some of the night life at the DTRNA.



Black-tailed hare



Desert kit fox



Kangaroo rat



Preserve Manager & Conservation Coordinator
Dr. Mosheh Wolf

Telephone: (951) 683-3872

Fax: (951) 683-6949

Email: mosheh.wolf@tortoise-tracks.org



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The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.

Founded 1974

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DTPC Founding Member Warren Forgey Passes

Warren, with his late wife Betty, was instrumental in the many aspects of DTPC efforts during the first 20 years. After retiring from the Board of Trustees in 1990, Warren and Betty continued to support the Committee for many years. Most recently Warren donated an automobile to DTPC ([Tortoise Tracks, Winter 2011 31:4, page 6](#)) and designated the Committee as a beneficiary of his estate.

A native of California, Warren lived in the Boron area his entire life. He was a WWII veteran, serving in the U.S Army Signal Corps in the Pacific Theater. He worked at the U.S. Borax Plant for a number of years and was an instrumentation technician for the Edwards Air Force Base Rocket Lab from 1955 until he retired in 1982.

He was a life member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, CA Rifle and Pistol Association and the National Rifle Association. Warren was also an active member of the American Legion, Masonic Lodge, and Scottish Rite. He served as a Kern Co. Reserve Deputy Sheriff.

As an active DTPC member, Warren served on the Board of Trustees for 17 years. Many of Warren's most valuable contributions were on site at the [Desert Tortoise Natural Area](#). He helped with the development and completion of the Interpretive Center, led tours, patrolled the boundary fence and participated in spring and fall work parties. His role in assisting with the development of the early photo monitoring protocols and accessing the remote DTNA areas on foot for those photos were some of the most interesting contributions for Warren personally. Along with Betty, he represented the DTPC at [CA Turtle and Tortoise Club](#) shows throughout Southern CA and assisted with other fund raising efforts. Like most of the early DTPC members, Warren was involved in most aspects of DTPC efforts. He will be missed as an invaluable friend to the desert, desert plants and wildlife and to his DTPC colleagues.



Betty Forgey (1920-2007) and Warren Forgey (1924-2014)
As printed in the Spring 1990 "Tortoise Tracks"



Dear Friends,

For the past three and half years, I have had a very good job. I have worked for an organization in whose mission I believe, involved in the very diverse aspects of conservation. I got to work with many interesting species and delighted in observing desert tortoises and the many other species that share their habitat in conservation areas established for their protection. I also got to work with amazing people—the volunteers, members, and partners of the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee. Your passion, enthusiasm, and contributions of time, money, and expertise that make the work of this organization possible never cease to impress and inspire me. Thank you for all that you do!

As my husband and I settle into a new area, I am excited for the work that Dr. Mosheh Wolf will be doing with the DTPC as the new Preserve Manager and Conservation Coordinator. I hope I will still see many of you at DTPC events in the future.

Sincerely,

Mary Kotschwar Logan

DTPC Calendar of Events

October 25-26, 2014: DTPC Fall Work Party, Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area

November 13, 2014: Give BIG Riverside County web-a-thon (givebigriversidecounty.org)

December 6, 2014: DTPC Board of Directors Meeting, Riverside, CA

The DTPC would like to thank the following volunteers:

Bonny Ahern
Craig Bansmer
Ron Berger
Dr. Kristin Berry
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More information for each event can be found by calling (951) 683-3872 or sending an email to mosheh.wolf@tortoise-tracks.org.

Artist's Donation to Desert Tortoise Preservation

Ellen Woodbury

One-of-a-Kind Stone Sculpture

www.ellenwoodbury.com

www.natureartists.com/ellen_woodbury.asp



Desert Queen

Red Travertine on Travertine
and Bubinga

8 x 15 x 10 inches

© Ellen Woodbury

Photo by Mel Schockner

Dear Mary Logan,

I am a fine art stone sculptor living in Loveland, CO. I carve stylized animals from a variety of colored and white marbles and sell them at regional and national art shows and galleries to make my living. Each sculpture is unique--the design is used only once, and I do not make copies. I have a series of animal sculptures of endangered species. When I sell one of these sculptures, I am able to donate a portion of the purchase price to a non-profit organization to help protect that animal and its habitat.

I recently sold a sculpture of a desert tortoise, titled "Desert Queen." As a result of that sale, I was able to donate to your organization. I just made a \$300 donation to the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee from your web site.

As the final step in my creative process, I write a short blog about each new sculpture. Here is a link to the blog post for Desert Queen so that you may know more about this sculpture and more about me: <http://www.ellenwoodbury.com/desert-queen/>

It is very gratifying to me to be able to help endangered animals through my art. They are the inspiration for my designs, and it is a way for me to give something back to them in the form of protection.

Thank you for helping to protect desert tortoises and their habitat. It is absolutely necessary for us to learn how to share the world with other creatures who live here.

Yours,

Ellen Woodbury

Loveland, Colorado,

Tuesday, August 19, 2014

From Huffington Post 08/17/14:

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/17/endangered-tortoises_n_5685055.html

To Save Endangered Tortoises, Wildlife Officials Take Unusual Step To Promote Sterilization

AP

Posted: 08/16/2014 10:25 pm EDT Updated: 08/17/2014 11:59 am EDT

LAS VEGAS (AP) — The federal government is taking the unusual step of beginning to sterilize an endangered species it is trying to save.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service officials say they have to curb the backyard breeding of desert tortoises because the growing population of unwanted pet tortoises diverts resources from efforts to preserve the species in the wild.

Mike Senn, assistant field supervisor for the Fish & Wildlife Service in Nevada, told the Las Vegas Review-Journal that it can be "a really difficult issue" to explain to people. He said simply breeding more tortoises won't save the species if not enough is done to improve and protect natural habitat and address threats in the wild.

Captive tortoises threaten native populations because they can carry diseases with them when they escape or are released illegally in the desert.

The agency will hold a two-day clinic in Las Vegas later this month to teach veterinarians from Nevada, Arizona, California and Utah new sterilization techniques from the experts who pioneered them.

About a dozen veterinarians will attend the clinic Aug. 27-28 and hear from Dr. Jay Johnson of the Arizona Exotic Animal Hospital and two researchers from the University of Georgia, Dr. Stephen Divers and Dr. Laila Proenca

Sterilizing tortoises was a complicated and invasive process, but Senn said new techniques are considered low-risk and effective.

Veterinarians trained at the clinic will be able to perform the procedures in their private practice and, Senn hopes, at future events where pet owners can get their tortoises sterilized for free or at reduced rates.

Nevada law allows just one pet tortoise per household, but the measure adopted last year grandfathered in those who already had more.

More than 50 tortoises will be sterilized during the clinic, and wildlife officials are seeking new homes for the animals. The nonprofit Tortoise Group is handling the adoptions. Those wishing to adopt or learn more about tortoise ownership can consult the organization's website.

Some of the tortoises to be operated on during the clinic came from a single crop of about 50 that were living in a backyard until their primary caretaker died — the sort of situation wildlife managers and tortoise rescue groups hope to avoid.

Other patients will be provided by the Desert Tortoise Conservation Center, a 220-acre facility established more than 20 years ago for developers to put the federally protected animals after removing them from building sites in booming Clark County.

The center is the valley's de facto tortoise shelter, taking in as many as 1,000 unwanted tortoises each year and racking up about \$1 million in costs that otherwise could be spent on research and recovery work, Senn said.

The Desert Tortoise Conservation Center will close at the end of the year when its funding runs out.

Online: Tortoise Group: tortoisegroup.org

Information from: Las Vegas Review-Journal, <http://www.lvrj.com>



Tortoise Tracks

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All contributors receive the quarterly newsletter *Tortoise Tracks*.

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