



Desert Tortoise
Preserve Committee, Inc.

Summer 2018
Edition 38: 2

Tortoise Tracks

Newsletter



Photo by Sharon Schafer

EVENTS

Spring Work Party

On March 17, twenty-two volunteers drove a total of 5,050 miles to participate in our annual spring work party. In addition to the many repeat volunteers we were delighted to see, two groups were represented: Desert Survivors and the California Native Plant Society - Bakersfield. The work party focused on removing three particularly invasive non-native species: Russian Thistle (*Salsola spp.*), Saharan Mustard (*Brassica tournefortii*), and Shortpod Mustard (*Hirschfeldia incana*). These plants spread quickly and compete with and displace native plant species. These non-native species offer a much lower nutritional value to wild animals than native forbs and thus can cause malnutrition if eaten in large quantities.



Shortpod Mustard (Hirschfeldia incana)
(Photo by Tim Shields)

Saharan and Shortpod mustards were prevalent within Cache Creek wash, a large wash which runs through the middle of the parcel, and along the southern access road leading to the wash. A large group of volunteers focused on removing these mustards while another group pulled Russian thistle from along the sides of the wash. Approximately 2.5 acres were covered in this area.

While one group worked on the wash, another group removed free Russian thistle that had accumulated against approximately one mile of the western border fence. A build-up along the fence can cause damage and helps non-natives to spread. The teams worked together to haul all of the plants over to the 40-yard dumpster and packed it completely full.



Volunteers unload another delivery of Russian Thistle
(Photo by Jill Estrada)

After several hours of weed abatement, the group gathered for a delicious potluck lunch followed by a literal dumpster closing ceremony. The amount of effort contributed by all of our volunteers is amazing and we would not be able to do what we do without them. As we keep up with the growing number of threats to the desert, we will ensure the recovery and conservation of desert tortoises and other desert species. As a reminder of why we continue with this work, a recently completed camera trap survey caught two tortoises on this property.

Thank you to everyone who joined us for this very important stewardship work. If you are interested in participating in our next work party, it will take place on Saturday, September 29. Details will follow in the next newsletter.



Volunteers gather for a group photo to celebrate the end of a successful day. (Photo by Jill Estrada)



Dedicated to the recovery and conservation of the Desert Tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*) and other rare and endangered species inhabiting the Mojave and western Sonoran deserts.

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

Founded 1974

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Tortoise Tracks is published
four times a year.

Save the Date!

Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee

Annual Meeting

January 19, 2019

at The Lancaster Columbus Club,

Knights of Columbus,

Lancaster, CA

Schedule TBD

Please join us for a lunch buffet, presentation,
and raffle at the 44th Annual Meeting.

Jim Andre, Director of Sweeney Granite
Mountains Desert Research Center, Mojave
National Preserve, will give a presentation
about Mojave Desert fauna.

Meet a Director: Bob Wood, Vice-President

Mr. Robert Wood serves as our Vice-President. He retired on March 1, 2013 having been employed by the Department of Defense for 42 years in every aspect of land use and environmental planning. After returning from Vietnam he was employed by the US Army Corps of Engineers in Los Angeles where for 12 years he prepared recreation master plans, water resource plans, flood control plans, and prepared Environmental Impact Statements and Clean Water Act and Navigation permits. In 1985 he went to work at Edwards Air Force Base as a long-range planner where he envisioned the environmental, facility, air space and community relations requirements for base missions 10 to 50 years in the future. The Center Commander asked Mr. Wood to develop a plan to bring the base into full compliance with all of the environmental statutes and regulations. For the next 26 years he turned an organization with 3 full time employees into one of the largest and most effective and successful environmental organizations in the DOD. He represents the DTPC on the Friends of Jawbone Committee and is the Chairman of the Public Lands Roundtable of Ridgecrest.



*Photo provided by
Bob Wood*

OUTREACH & EDUCATION

The End of Another Successful Naturalist Season -Tina Erway

It has been a truly amazing adventure as the full-time naturalist for the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area. The season went by fast and it feels like just yesterday we were seeing tortoises emerge from their slumber to forage for food. It was a delight observing them in action as they snapped up any wildflowers that popped up at the beginning of the season and then moved onto the less preferred flora as the desert floor began drying up. I was also presented with a chance to see two tortoises mating for three hours! The weather was as mercurial as usual; ever-changing from freezing, to thunderstorms, to heating up to get the tortoises moving!

Several tortoises were observed this season including #1056 “Greeter Guy”, an older female “Half Moon”, and an unmarked female tortoise “Chip” as I named her. Quite a few rattlesnakes were also observed; more than in recent years. The female Say’s Phoebe that successfully hatched and fledged three babies under our naturalist trailer last year made a new nest under the Discovery trailer this year. Unfortunately, her babies disappeared as soon as they hatched. We suspect that a coachwhip snake that was living in a nearby bush may have been the cause of their demise. Nature in action!

We received an eclectic mix of visitors this year and many were able to enjoy the sight of a tortoise or at least numerous lizards. It is such a pleasure being able to witness a person’s first sighting of a wild desert tortoise. That incredible moment when they first realize that what they thought was a rock is actually a wild desert tortoise; they really begin to understand the value of the desert and why we are here to protect it.

As the season comes to a close and the trailers are pulled out, the tortoises will continue to truck along and we will continue admiring and helping to protect them! Thank you to everyone who visited us this year and for making it such a great season.



Photos provided by Tina Erway

LeConte's Thrashers

This species of thrasher is a year-round resident, a gray bird with a sickle-shaped bill. LeConte's thrashers occur in saltbush, creosote bush, and Joshua tree vegetation in the Mojave and Sonoran deserts of California, Nevada, Arizona and southwestern Utah. Populations also occur in parts of the Central Valley or northwestern Mexico. You are much more likely to see this bird on the ground than in flight; it prefers open ground, spends time associated with washes, and primarily forages for insects, spiders, and scorpions, butterflies, small lizards and snakes, and eggs, seeds and berries on the ground and in litter below shrubs.

LeConte's thrashers are monogamous and found in pairs. Females lay from 2 to 4 greenish blue eggs, sometimes with brownish dots, in a bulky nest of sticks and twigs, usually placed from one to eight feet above the ground in desert shrubs. The inside diameter of the nest is 3 to 4 inches with a depth of 2 to 3 inches and is usually lined with leaves, grass, fibers, paper, and rootlets. Both sexes incubate the eggs for 14 or more days. After hatching, the parents feed the young for 12 to 20 days or more before they fledge. Pairs may produce 2 to 3 broods per spring.

What do we know about abundance and how likely are you to see a single bird or a pair? No studies on densities exist for the Mojave Desert. In *Field Guide to Western Birds' Nests*, author H.H. Harrison reported that pairs occurred in densities of 5 or less per square mile. Matt Brooks conducted a study comparing species and abundance of birds and lizards found inside and outside the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area in May, July and December of 1994 and again in May and July of 1995 and Jan of 1996. He reported that counts of LeConte's thrasher were 317% higher inside than outside the protective fence of the Natural Area. The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee supported his study, which was published in *Environmental Management* in 1999. John Sauer, a U.S. Geological Survey expert on breeding birds across America, shared the long-term status of

breeding birds in the Mojave and Sonoran deserts at the Desert Tortoise Council Symposium held in Las Vegas in February of this year. Sauer summarized current trends for LeConte's Thrasher. Populations throughout the Mojave and Sonoran deserts are declining at a rate of 2.5% per year, based on surveys undertaken on 48 breeding bird routes from 1968 to 2017.



The thrashers are present in the eastern and western expansion areas adjacent to the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area. During 2016 and 2017, Sunrise Consulting (Lehong Chow, Kathy Simon) conducted a survey of Mohave ground squirrels and other species using camera traps for the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, as part of a mitigation agreement. Lehong Chow captured photos of LeConte's thrashers on cameras in both areas in 2016 and 2017. Lehong will be doing surveys again this spring too and we hope she is again successful. Someday the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee may have funds to assess densities both inside and outside the fence—determining abundance over a large area will be a challenge!



LeConte's Thrasher captured on camera during 2017 Mohave ground squirrel survey

Our electronic newsletter is growing in popularity and we want to see it continue to grow! One added benefit of receiving the e-newsletter is that it is provided in color and is received sooner than those that are mailed. If you would like to be added to our e-newsletter list, please email us at dtpc@pacbell.net.

Remembering Genny Smith

By Laura Stockton

Genny Smith, DTPC supporter and desert conservation activist, passed away at her home in Cupertino on March 4 at 94. She was best known for her conservation efforts in the Eastern Sierra. Genny's dedication to environmental protection is exemplified in the 27 year effort to stop the building of the Trans-Sierra Highway to connect Fresno and the Eastern Sierra. She was also instrumental in the founding of the Mono Lake Committee and in raising funds for the legal battle that resulted in limiting the amount of water that could be diverted from Mono Lake.

Genny's summer cabin at the foot of Mammoth Mountain was her base for exploration, conservation efforts and writing for decades. The first edition of her comprehensive guide *Mammoth Lakes Sierra* was published in 1959 and was followed by a similar guide *Deepest Valley: A Guide to Owens Valley* in 1962. Bev Steveson, founding DTPC member, was asked by Genny to take photos for the 1976 fourth edition of the Mammoth Lakes guide. From her association with Bev, Genny learned of the early efforts of the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee. She was the first to donate stocks to DTPC.

In 1977 she got deeply involved in the California Desert Conservation Area Plan and was chair of the Desert Advisory Committee (DAC). In this role Genny used her exceptional ability to unite diverse stakeholders toward resolution. In the late 1970's there was an effort to close Eureka Dunes in the Northern Mojave Desert to off-road vehicles (ORV's). The Eureka Dunes is one of the tallest dune systems in North America and home to a number of endemic plants and animals. The DAC was scheduled to visit the dunes at noon in July prior to making its recommendation on any closure. The ORV enthusiasts were prepared to give DAC members rail and dune buggy rides on the dunes.

Those of us who were concerned for the wildlife and advocating closure went into action. I, Bev Steveson, and Genny's husband, Ward Smith, captured a number of animals that the DAC would otherwise not see during the midday visit in July. After the ORV rides Genny guided the group to our site to view some of the invertebrates, reptiles and small mammals that live on the dunes. The Eureka Dunes, now part of Death Valley National Park, were closed to OHV use.

Genny was a persistent, quietly dynamic force who made connections and got things done to protect wild places. As written in her San Francisco Chronicle obituary: "If you asked Genny about anything she had accomplished, even her books, she would say what she always said: 'It wasn't me, it was the effort of everyone else.'" Her legacy is a reminder that successful conservation efforts take decades of work by well-led teams.



Genny Smith

DTPC Calendar of Events & Volunteer Opportunities

- June 23, 2018—DTPC Board Meeting
- All summer—Fence monitoring at DTRNA
- September 29, 2018—Fall Work Party

DTPC MEMBERSHIP/CONTRIBUTION FORM

1. YES, I want to help save the threatened desert tortoise and its habitat! Here is my tax-deductible membership contribution of:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$25 Individual | <input type="checkbox"/> \$100 Benefactor |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$40 Family | <input type="checkbox"/> \$200 Patron/Corporate |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$75 Sponsor | <input type="checkbox"/> \$1000 Life Membership |

2. My membership is current but here is an additional donation of \$_____. Please use it for:

- | | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fencing | <input type="checkbox"/> Land Acquisition | <input type="checkbox"/> Where Most Needed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ | | |

3. I'd like to help you grow the DTPC endowment. Please accept an additional donation of:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$250 | <input type="checkbox"/> \$2,500 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$500 | <input type="checkbox"/> \$5,000 |
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Let's grow the endowment!

- I would like my contribution to remain anonymous
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Thank you.

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by email at dtpc@pacbell.net

Volunteer Corner

Volunteer Needs:

Fence Monitoring—The DTPC owns and manages more than 50 miles of fencing in and around the DTRNA and expansion areas which need to be monitored and repaired as needed.

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee would like to acknowledge Andrew Yost for all of his work helping with fence monitoring and repair. Andrew is a local resident of California City and began volunteering after visiting our booth at the 2017 Tortoise Days event in California City. We thank him for all of his help keeping an eye on our fencing. He truly has helped us to protect desert tortoise habitat!