



Summer
2021
Edition 41:2

Tortoise Tracks

Newsletter

Dry Spring at DTRNA by Scott Shupe

It was a slow start for the Seasonal Onsite Naturalist position at the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area (DTRNA) this spring. The trailers didn't arrive onsite until March 24. Between greeting the visitors that showed up almost immediately, learning about the duties of the job, reading up on tortoises, and getting the visitor area squared away, the first few days remain a bit of a blur! Luckily for me DTRNA's part time naturalist of nine years, Lisa Lavelle, came to my rescue. Among other important lessons I learned from Lisa was the location of several active tortoise burrows. In spite of the fact that there were few tortoises actually leaving their burrows, I was soon able to show most visitors a tortoise or two resting just inside the mouth of their burrow. To say it has been a dry season at DTRNA would be a bit of an understatement. I arrived in



southern California filled with eager anticipation. Although I have been in the Mojave Desert before, I had never seen the "spring bloom" and I was anxious to see and experience this wonderful natural phenomenon. Alas, the winter rains didn't happen this year. Subsequently, neither did the spring bloom! Although I am disappointed in not being able to see and learn about the wildflowers, forbs, and seasonal plants that form the carpet of a desert in bloom, I have enjoyed my experience here immensely. Not only have I observed and photographed several vertebrate species that were new to me, I have also had the opportunity on my days off to travel around southern California and enjoy the wealth of natural beauty and variable ecosystems of the region. Among those new species I have had the pleasure of observing and studying firsthand were the three examples of *Gopherus agassizii* that live in the immediate vicinity of the DTRNA visitor area. A juvenile tortoise became a reliable friend who could always be counted on if visitors were willing to "take a little hike" to see a tortoise. In the mornings this young tortoise could often be found sitting outside in the immediate vicinity of its burrow, often sleeping in the sun with its eyes closed. Less reliable, but still sometimes accommodating, was the young adult whose burrow was nearby the juvenile. But it was the adult male whose home range was closest to the naturalist trailer that really captured my imagination. The first few times I showed this tortoise to visitors he was always in one of the three burrows within his territory. On a couple of occasions I managed to see him out as he strolled leisurely from one burrow to the next. For some time my interest in

Dry Spring at DTRNA (continued)

him was purely academic. That was until the day I ran into him out of his burrow in a new area where I had not seen him before. He moved about slowly, occasionally taking a mouthful of dried and desiccated plants from last springs bloom. It was easy to imagine him being perplexed and frustrated by the lack of resources available during this drought.



But that may have been more a projection of my feelings about the situation. He was, after all, splendidly adapted for dealing with these kinds of stressors. As I watch he began to move in my direction. I sat down and he moved to within a few feet. He had known I was there from the beginning and I couldn't escape the feeling that he was curious. What was this being whose voice he had heard so many times? Why was it always bringing visitors to gleefully invade his privacy as he rested just inside one of his burrows?

He stopped just feet away from where I sat and looked me in the eye. I have been moved many

times by close personal encounters with wild creatures. But this occasion really touched my senses. This gentle and innocuous plant eater had beaten incredible odds as a hatchling and survived for decades in one of the harshest environments in America. His kind has been around for millions of years. But the challenges of the modern world are proving to be insurmountable for even this superb survivalist. Desert Tortoise populations are in a tailspin from which they may not recover. As we stared at each other, I couldn't help but wonder about the things he knew of his world that I could never know. And I couldn't help but think of something I knew that he could never know. The knowledge that my kind will likely be the end of his kind. I realized then that of all the weeks, all the days, and all the hours I would spend in this desert, this would be the moment that would stay with me.

Summarizing all the pleasures of spending nearly three months living at the DTRNA, nothing surpasses the highly valued and memorable experiences afforded by the people for whom I have had the privilege being a guide and interpreter. Visitors to the DTRNA are almost always enthusiastic about nature and wildlife. Moreover, they nearly always express deep concern over learning of the modern day challenges faced by the Desert Tortoise. The sincerity of their feelings was repeatedly affirmed by the tone of their voice, the look in their eye, and by the folded bills they generously stuffed into the tiny donation box in the interpretive trailer. They gave this old naturalist hope for the future. Not just the future of the Desert Tortoise, but the future of my young grandson and the billions like him who will face daunting environmental



Photos taken by Scott Shupe

challenges in the years to come. Finally, topping the list of my experiences here are the people who make up the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee. Whether they were a volunteer, paid employee, or board member they have shown themselves to be kind, considerate, helpful and warm. Without question the DTPC is made up of some of finest examples of *Homo sapiens* this naturalist has ever encountered. I could probably fill several more pages with words describing how I feel about my tenure as the 2021 seasonal naturalist at DTRNA. But that would be superfluous. I can do it in a single word. Grateful.

A photograph of a scorpion resting on a dark, textured wooden surface. The scorpion is light brown with a segmented body and two large pincers at the front. To the left of the scorpion, there are several dark, irregularly shaped rocks or pieces of wood. The lighting is somewhat dim, creating a naturalistic scene.

In conjunction with the state-wide California Biodiversity Day, the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area hosted a few events for the public in celebration! On the night of September 10, Ted Hodkinson of the China Lake Astronomy Society brought his telescope and expertise to show participants the stars and planets of the night sky over the desert. Additionally, we used ultraviolet (UV) flashlights to find scorpions; a thin layer in their exoskeletons reacts to UV light, such as black light or moonlight, which causes the scorpion's body to glow! Overall, we had 15+ people come out to stargaze and experience the desert on a nice, calm night. The next day, we hosted a BioBlitz on the DTRNA bright and ear-

ly. A BioBlitz is when a group works together to find and identify as many different species as possible in a given place and time. The data gathered from these efforts helps scientists answer questions regarding species ranges, con-



nectivity, and population demographics. We had a smaller turnout than the night before, but we still identified many species that morning in the desert! Although we didn't see any tortoises, the lizards were out in full force enjoying the pleasant, warm conditions that reptiles enjoy. Overall, we identified 11 species in and around the DTRNA, which we posted on iNaturalist. iNaturalist is a social network of naturalists, citizen scientists, and biologists built on the concept of mapping and sharing observations of biodiversity across the globe. Next time you are at the DTRNA and see an interesting animal or plant, feel free to post that finding on iNaturalist! We would like to thank Alexia Svejda, the California City Chamber of Commerce President, for partnering with us to make this event happen.

Additionally, we would like to thank Sarah Berryman and Ben DeLancey for coming out Saturday morning and identifying a bunch of species!



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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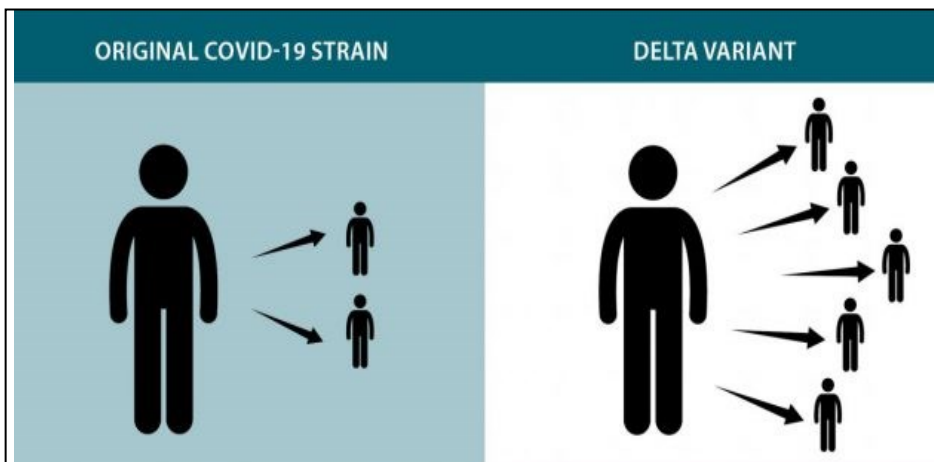
Cover Picture By and Courtesy of:
Tim Shields

New Merchandise



A limited supply of embroidered desert wildlife hats will be added to our online merchandise store! Do you have a nature enthusiast on your holiday shopping list? Consider purchasing one of these rugged and durable Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area hats as a gift. Our desert is home to a diverse array of life represented. The Desert Scorpion, Kangaroo Rat, Desert Tortoise, Road Runner, and Hairy Tarantula hat options are available for purchase starting October 8th at the following link: <https://tortoise-tracks.org/shop/>. All proceeds from the sale of our merchandise go toward the preservation of the Desert Tortoise.

Fall Work Party Canceled



Due to the CDC's reports that the COVID - 19 Delta variant spreads more easily than previous variants - it may cause more than 2 times as many infections with a higher rate of community transmission, the board decided to delay our Fall Work Party to ensure the safety of both staff and volunteers. Plans to host a Spring Work Party continue as we closely monitor the CDC recommendations on a frequent basis.

Save The Date

GivingTuesday was founded in 2012 with the idea of creating a day that encourages people to do good. In 2021, GivingTuesday is a global generosity movement founded on the belief that *"everyone has something to give and every act of generosity counts."* As a reader you are likely as passionate about the preservation and wellbeing of the desert tortoise as we are. You can offer support through pledging to making a tax-deductible donation, for the holidays, signing up for volunteer at our Spring Work Party, gifting a membership to loved ones, or advocate for state and national funding of conservation lands such as the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area. We thank you in advance, however you choose to express your act of generosity.



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November 6-7th Come Visit Our Table!



The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee will have an informational booth in our hometown of Ridgecrest for the eighth annual Petroglyph Festival. The celebration includes a street fair, Native American live music, crafts from Native American artists, and a tribute to local Petroglyphs, including a full slate of Native American dancers and drummers.

Tom Astle Workshop

Adapting to the ever-evolving Covid 19 need for social distancing and touchless interactions, Tom Astle generously hosted a macro photography workshop online for the benefit of the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area on July 19th. The invitation to participate in this free workshop to our membership was met with great enthusiasm and a robust attendance. Attendees donated hundreds of dollars to the DTRNA in appreciation of Tom's workshop with a request for additional online interactive offerings. Thank you to Tom for his support and innovative workshop. Additional gratitude to our partners at the California City Chamber of Commerce who boosted our social media event post, garnering more than 6,000 views! We love feedback on events or workshops our membership would like to participate in. Please send your suggestions to Sophia Osho at DTPC@tortoise-tracks.org.



Passive Giving for The Holiday Season

Definition: *When you shop at online stores that donate a portion of your purchase to the non-profit of your choice.*

As of the printing of our newsletter there are less than 87 days until Cyber Monday when 174 million Americans are online spending



an average of \$335 per person, kicking off holiday shopping. We encourage you to shop at smile.amazon.com where you can select the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc. as your favorite charity and Amazon will donate 0.5% of your qualified purchases to us directly! Once you set the DTPC as your preferred organization you will only need to make normal purchases to continue your year-round passive philanthropy. If you would like to give the desert tortoise an early Christmas gift, please help spread the word to your friends and family to set the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee Inc. as their smile.amazon.com organization before holiday shopping starts! **Continued on the next page**

How to sign up:

1. Go to www.smile.amazon.com
2. Log into your Amazon account
3. Select the “Get Started” button on the top banner
4. In the search bar type Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee
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Remember, for all future purchases do not use amazon.com, instead, go to www.smile.amazon.com

Gopherus Agassizii Now ‘Red Listed’



Published this month, the desert tortoise was upgraded to critically endangered. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) maintains a Red List for species in trouble, each being rated from Vulnerable to Critically Endangered on a global scale. This listing should benefit the species enormously if enough corporations, etc., hear about it. Please use this link to review the complete report on our website www.Tortoise-Tracks.org

Defenders of Wildlife Leads Effort to ‘Uplist’ the Mojave Desert Tortoise

During March 2020, the height of the initial shutdowns due to Covid- 19, the Defenders of Wildlife, with a bit of assistance from the Desert Tortoise Council and your Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, submitted a petition to the California Fish and Game Commission (the Commission), asking for additional protection for the tortoise. As stated in the petition, “despite federal and state protections, the desert tortoise is closer to extinction than it was in 1989 and 1990 when it was listed by the Commission and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, respectively. A change in listing from Threatened to Endangered will reflect the current dire situation facing California’s state reptile and is necessary to generate substantially increased attention and efforts to protect desert tortoises from become extinct in California. The Commission announced last fall that it would take a year to study our petition. Therefore, we expect to have a decision by November 2021. For more details on this petition, and for updates once a

decision has been reached, please visit www.tortoise-tracks.org or follow us on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/DefendersofWildlife) for updates.



Star Gazing at the DTRNA



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Sign up to receive the *Tortoise Tracks* newsletter electronically! Recipients will obtain the newsletter immediately after publication and will be able to view the beautiful pictures in each edition in **COLOR**. This method reduces paper usage, reduces our costs, is better for our environment, and allows us to better spend our limited capital on tortoise recovery.

To receive electronic copies of the newsletter, please notify us by email at dtpc@tortoise-tracks.org.

GO GREEN

Special Update:

The Tortoise Tracks Newsletters are now available online! To view current, and past year publications, go to our website www.tortoise-tracks.org select the “What’s New” tab and navigate to [Tortoise Tracks Newsletter](#).



Tortoise Tracks

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If you would prefer to receive an electronic copy, notify us by email at dtpc@tortoise-tracks.org

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"/> \$75 Sponsor | <input type="checkbox"/> \$200 Patron/Corporate |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$40 Family | <input type="checkbox"/> \$100 Benefactor | <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 Permanent Endowment. Please accept an additional donation of:

- | | | |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$250 | <input type="checkbox"/> \$1,000 | <input type="checkbox"/> \$5,000 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$500 | <input type="checkbox"/> \$2,500 | <input type="checkbox"/> Other \$_____ |

☐ Marketable Securities (Stock): Contact DTPC Finance Committee Chairperson, Greg Lathrop at 2redgrey@gmail.com or (415) 637-7187 for assistance

Let's grow the Permanent Endowment!

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I would like my contribution to remain anonymous | <input type="checkbox"/> I would like to receive <i>Tortoise Tracks</i> electronically (please provide email address) |
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Please make your check payable to **DTPC** and mail to:

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Thank you.

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