

SUMMER  
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# Tortoise Tracks

Newsletter

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**ENDANGERED!**

## **CALIFORNIA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION “UPLISTS” DESERT TORTOISE TO ENDANGERED SPECIES STATUS**

**SAN JOSE, California** – Defenders of Wildlife, the Desert Tortoise Council and the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee applaud the California Fish and Game Commission’s unanimous 4-0 decision [on April 18, 2024] to list the Mojave desert tortoise as endangered under the California Endangered Species Act (CESA).

“The Commission’s decision that uplisting is warranted accurately reflects the dire status of our state reptile and its urgent need for additional protections,” said Jeff Aardahl, senior California representative for Defenders of Wildlife and co-author of the uplisting petition. “The Mojave desert tortoise serves as an indicator of the health of our desert ecosystem, and both the species and its habitats are facing a myriad of serious threats.”

The three conservation organizations first petitioned the Commission to uplist the Mojave desert tortoise in March 2020. Later that year, the Commission found that consideration of uplisting was warranted and tasked the California Department of Fish and Wildlife to prepare a status review of the species within 12 months, along with a recommendation on listing status.

“We have to recognize that desert tortoises are not an annual species that can rapidly recover from population declines,” said Michael Tuma, PhD, Desert Tortoise Council board member. “With their long generation times, slow growth and low reproductive rates, tortoise populations will need decades to recover from population declines, and that’s only if we can provide an environment with sustained relief from threats. Listing the species as endangered under CESA will give them the best chance at successful recovery.”

In 1984, Defenders of Wildlife and other groups petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list the desert tortoise under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). In 1989, the species was listed as threatened by the California Fish and Game Commission, and in 1990, it was listed as threatened under the federal ESA.

“Our fifty years of experience at the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area in the western Mojave desert showcases the effectiveness of protecting large tracts of contiguous land free of key threats such as off-highway vehicle use and livestock grazing,” said Roger Dale, president of the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee. “We are hopeful that the uplisting will attract additional resources for proven conservation measures such as land acquisition, fencing, habitat restoration and permanent stewardship of preserve areas.”

Despite its protections at the state and federal level, the desert tortoise is closer to extinction than ever before. The change in listing is necessary as it reflects the direness of the desert tortoise’s decline and may generate more awareness and protection for the species.

The threats facing the Mojave desert tortoise include habitat loss from development, military base expansion and training, off-highway vehicle use and livestock grazing. Other risks to its survival include disease, utility maintenance projects, invasive species, and extended droughts associated with climate change.



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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## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

It was a very busy and productive spring for the DTPC and its partners. Here's a short recap:

- After a 4-year review process (initiated by a petition submitted by Defenders of Wildlife, the Desert Tortoise Council, and DTPC), the California Fish and Wildlife Commission voted unanimously on April 18 to "uplist" the State protective status of the Mojave desert tortoise from threatened to endangered. DTPC Board members Ron Berger (who spearheaded DTPC's efforts on this front over the past four years) and Roger Dale spoke at the public hearing in San Jose, CA to urge the Commission to support the uplisting. (See cover story for press release issued by Defenders of Wildlife).

- On April 6, DTPC celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a day of special events at the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area (DTRNA). Highlights included a trail walk led by DTPC founder Dr. Kristin Berry, a macro photography workshop presented by Tom Astle, a scenic drive to the Kohn Dry Lake overlook led by DTPC Preserve Manager Liam Connolly, a volunteer work party led by Liam, and a complementary picnic lunch for all participants.

- DTPC representatives also attended many other public events and federal agency meetings during the first half of 2024 to raise public awareness of our conservation work, recognize the accomplishments of our partner organizations, and advocate for effective public-agency stewardship of tortoise habitat throughout the range of the desert tortoise.

- For the 36<sup>th</sup> consecutive year, DTPC – in partnership with the Bureau of Land Management – funded and staffed a springtime naturalist program at the DTRNA (see Page 6).

- In addition to spotlighting this year's naturalists, we've taken the opportunity (on Pages 3-5) to recognize the behind-the-scenes contributions of other key members of DTPC's small but dedicated staff.

- We launched our new website! (see Page 7)

- The DTPC Board has been actively engaging (in a series of special Board meetings) in a process of updating our internal 5-year Strategic Plan. A key focus of this Plan will be to expand the corps of dedicated volunteers who support our work in diverse ways. (See Page 7 for opportunities to get involved!)

As always, we are tremendously grateful for the loyal support of our members. Your persistence has made DTPC's accomplishments over the past 50 years possible. We couldn't do our work on behalf of the tortoise without you!

**Roger Dale, DTPC President**

## RECOGNIZING DTPC'S DEDICATED STAFF

### **Jun Lee, Executive Director and Director of Land Acquisition**

In early 2024, the DTPC Board was pleased to officially name Jun Lee as the organization's Executive Director – a role he had fulfilled on a part-time, interim basis in 2022 and 2023. Although new to the Executive Director position, Jun has been a constant presence in DTPC's work for nearly 34 years.

On a lark, Jun attended a DTPC Board meeting as a guest in the fall of 1990 (invited by his friend Roger Dale, who was then a new member of the Board). Before leaving the meeting that day, Jun had volunteered to become the editor of Tortoise Tracks newsletter, drawing on his background in journalism. A few months later he was elected to the DTPC Board and began actively leading several DTPC initiatives, including fundraising, land acquisition and educational outreach. In 1992 Jun resigned his Board position and began work as a contract staff member, initially focused on grant writing and land acquisition. Through Jun's persistence, DTPC's progress on purchasing private inholdings of land within the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area accelerated in the early and mid-1990's, enabling DTPC (working in partnership with the Bureau of Land Management) to protect over 5,400 acres since 1992. Jun also secured funding to install at the DTRNA, 6 linear miles of tortoise-exclusion fencing and a critical 1 linear mile open gap along the eastern boundary of Section 13.



During this time, Jun was also instrumental in establishing DTPC's program for mitigation land-banking. Through mitigation land banking, the DTPC enters into agreements with development companies that are required to purchase replacement habitat to compensate for the impacts of development projects. With these funds, DTPC purchases and protects desert tortoise habitat and assumes responsibility for long-term stewardship of the protected land (using endowment funds which are also paid by the project developers). These mitigation projects involve extensive coordination with a range of state, federal and local agencies, with which Jun has established excellent relationships on behalf of DTPC. These agencies include the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, the California Energy Commission, Caltrans, and the County of San Bernardino. In total, DTPC's mitigation projects have protected over 1,700 acres of critical desert tortoise habitat in San Bernardino and Riverside counties.

In his capacity as Executive Director, Jun takes the lead on recruiting and managing full-time, part-time and seasonal staff (including the springtime naturalists); managing DTPC contractors and volunteers who support DTPC's parcel monitoring, weed removal and raven nest monitoring programs; grant writing and other fundraising; and ongoing work on land acquisition and responding to opportunities for new mitigation projects. Jun enjoys a very "hands on" approach to his work for DTPC and is frequently onsite at the DTRNA supporting staff and contractors and engaged in DTPC's habitat monitoring efforts at DTPC properties in other locations in the Western Mojave, Eastern Mojave and Colorado deserts.

Jun's work has been widely recognized by public and private entities involved in protecting desert habitats. He received the Desert Tortoise Council's prestigious Kristin H. Berry Award in 2018, the DTPC's Golden Tortoise Award in 2016, and the Desert Tortoise Council's James St. Amant Award in 2005 and 2022.

### **Liam Connolly, Preserve Manager and Conservation Coordinator**

Liam Connolly who has served as DTPC's Preserve Manager and Conservation Coordinator since 2022, completed his work with the Preserve Committee effective June 30, 2024. Liam has excelled at the rather daunting task of monitoring the hundreds of parcels of land that DTPC is required to survey each year. He has also been a very visible presence at the DTRNA during his time with the DTPC, supporting the logistical needs of our springtime naturalists and coordinating volunteers for our spring and fall work parties. We thank Liam for his dedication and wish him the best on his next endeavors. With his permission, we are sharing excerpts of the letter Liam wrote to the DTPC Board on his final day of employment with the Committee.

*Liam's Thank You Letter ...*

*I first began work here on November 1, 2022; this was two years ago. I remember fondly my "Relay to Ridgecrest Road-trip" that I told my whole family about. It was nine days of travel in total, but the actual trip took roughly two weeks. My family and I purchased a car for my country-wide journey and a new computer to replace my ailing one I had since high school. I had to spend a few extra days taking virtual tortoise classes from Dr. Berry and her colleagues while other days just had me and my family spending time together wherever we were. All of this for a job; one of many that I had been steadily applying for since September, called me up and said they were interested.*

*Ever since I've moved to the Mojave desert and scouted all 309 [DTPC-owned] parcels the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area has to offer, I've learned a few things about myself and people: they are always willing to help and that hope overrides all things. If you ever give up hope, then you are doomed by fate to destroy yourself. Everyone I've ever worked with or encountered on the waysides of pavement or sand roads have nothing but good things about our good friend Mr. Gopherus agassizii. No one in this desert from the soldiers on base to the self-proclaimed "desert rats" on the outskirts want to see our friend leave us. Even with its long overdue title of endangered we still have an overwhelming desire to see the livelihood and longevity of our target species prosper to the level it once was. I do come across the occasional naysayer that thinks there's a snowball's chance in hell for the desert tortoise to make it any further than 2040; but from what I've seen from the masses of volunteers gathered to the cadence of off-roaders remarking on their frequent tortoise encounters; they are outnumbered.*

*Our 40+ square miles of desert may be the final stand against the forces that encroach on the desert tortoise's survivability; at least for the upper Mojave variant. And at my last work party we saw a male and female tortoise within 10 minutes of each other by Cache Creek dry wash. Little moments like this give me hope for the future of this incredible keystone species*

*No one or nothing understands the concept of hope more than the desert tortoise itself. In the face of its potential destruction, it stands with impudence against the tides of time and has so for millions of years. Having or caring for a tortoise is not like any other pet or animal that is seen as a peer or equal; the passing down of a tortoise is symbolic in passing down the torch of knowledge from one generation to another.*

*The tortoise is the posterchild of the underdog and of survival; it is one of the few animals on this earth that effortlessly outlives us and makes it look easy. Unlike the parrot or raven which is similarly long lived; it does not constantly bring attention to itself through squawks, rather it quietly takes on life with a stoic dignity like that of a wizened old man. It defies all odds with its stalwart zeal, humbly holding its own against the harsh desert in its own quiet solitude. If the tortoise has what it takes to confront the Mojave at its worst for its long lifespan; then it has what it takes to outlast the 6<sup>th</sup> great extinction we are currently causing. But like any other endangered animal or plant it wouldn't mind a little help, even if it can't directly ask us.*

*I leave this job with a sentimental feeling in my heart knowing that I've done all that I could and helped out in any way possible. I'd like to thank once again all the remarkable and talented people I've worked with in this incredible Committee. Thank you for all of your guidance and effort to make this job an immaculate experience and for making things better for tortoise and tourist alike. Thank you for trusting and believing in me to do the right thing. I will miss all of you dearly and I hope this organization continues to prosper and inspire people as it has done for me and others for as long as we continue to coexist with the desert tortoise. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.*

*See y'all on the ol' dusty trail,*

**Liam Connolly**

**Veranda Kuhar, Project Manager**

Veranda contributes to a number of projects that impact our member engagement efforts. She is currently working on updating our membership software which will enable us to maintain member contributions and volunteer activities. As an avid artist she also is involved in redesigning our products including a new line of t-shirts and other merchandise.

**Alexia Svejda, Outreach Coordinator**

Alexia is spearheading our social media and outreach efforts to both attract new supporters and create interactive activities for our members. She has committed countless hours in promoting the DTPC's programs throughout the years through social media including marketing the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration for the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area, Spring and Fall work parties at the preserve, and the 2023 National Public Lands Day events at the DTRNA. She is also a valued volunteer resource each year for our Raven Nest Monitoring and Egg Oiling project at the Research Natural Area.

**Steve Ishii, GIS and IT**

Steve is a former board member of the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee and has been volunteering with the DTPC since 2009. Steve spent over 35 years working in corporate I.T., primarily in the auto industry. At the start of 2019, Steve transitioned to providing I.T. and GIS services for environmental consulting companies and conservation groups with a focus on the automation of workflows for field data collection, data management, and project reporting using ArcGIS applications, internet, and database technologies.

Since 2019, Steve has been working with the DTPC to implement systems to help automate the committee's grants, weed management, raven control, and land management efforts. The Committee's workflows have all benefited and will continue to benefit from this knowledge.





## 36<sup>th</sup> ANNUAL NATURALIST SEASON AT DTRNA

Beginning in 1989, the DTPC – with funding support from the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) – has annually staffed and managed a springtime naturalist program at the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area (DTRNA). This year’s naturalists included: Hanna Strauss, who served as the head naturalist from March 18 through April 30; Nadia Menendez-Roberts, who served as the head naturalist from May 1 through June 5; and Michaela Patrovsky-Chacon, who served as the part-time/assistant naturalist for the entire spring season. Michaela is the daughter of Ed Patrovsky – a retired

BLM ranger who served as the head DTRNA naturalist for about ten years and pitched in as a volunteer a couple of times this year when the naturalists needed extra support. Photo: Hanna Strauss (left) with Michaela Patrovsky-Chacon (right).

Collectively, the naturalists provide 24/7 coverage of the DTRNA during the spring visitor season (typically mid-March through early June). Highlights of this year’s naturalist season include:

- 275 visitor groups (totaling 646 individuals) interacted with the naturalists
- A total of nine groups reported seeing a tortoise during their visit (three in March, five in April and one in May)
- The naturalists reported seeing ravens on 119 occasions (totaling 207 individual ravens)
- The naturalists and/or visitors reported seeing other wildlife on 142 occasions (including various lizards, snakes, birds and mammals)

Detailed documentation of the naturalists’ work this spring will be provided in the “Observations and Activities of the Naturalists at the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area” and will be posted on DTPC’s website later this summer.

A team of staff and volunteers from both DTPC and BLM works diligently each year to provide logistical support to the onsite naturalists. Logistically, three trailers (two used for naturalist living quarters and one used for distribution of educational materials and sale of DTPC merchandise) need to be towed to site at the beginning of the season, thoroughly cleaned and setup for operation, and returned to storage (at the BLM’s facility in Ridgecrest) when the season concludes. This year we especially thank BLM Natural Resource Specialist Priscilla Watson-Winn, BLM Ranger Melissa Brown, DTPC Preserve Manager Liam Connolly, DTPC Executive Director Jun Lee, and DTPC Board member Laura Stockton for their frequent onsite support of the naturalists. The work of the naturalists significantly enhances the DTRNA visitor experience during the busy spring months and provides a full-time presence to observe conditions of wildlife and natural resources and visitor activity at the DTRNA.

Photo: Nadia Menendez-Roberts.



## THANK YOU FOR YOUR PATIENCE AS WE UPDATE OUR CONTACT LISTS!

We sincerely apologize for the lateness of the Summer issue of Tortoise Tracks. We are in the process of converting our member database to new membership management software (WildApricot) and the transition caused delays in making needed updates to our contact lists for mailed and emailed copies of the newsletter. Going forward, the new system will allow us to be much more efficient and timely in distributing newsletters and other vital communications to our valued members. As always, the privacy and security of your contact information is our highest priority as we work to streamline our membership management.

## Opportunities to Get Involved with DTPC's Work

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee is continually working to build its Board of Directors and corps of active volunteers. We are currently looking for members interested in filling the following positions:

- Recording Secretary
- Newsletter Editor
- DTRNA docent/tour guide (onsite training and reference materials provided – we are currently forming an interest list for the Spring 2025 season)
- DTPC outreach ambassadors (training and media materials provided) – make presentations about desert tortoise conservation to schools and civic groups in your community
- Board intern (for college students interested in environmental careers)

The Recording Secretary's primary duties are to take minutes at each Board meeting and then to type the minutes for distribution to the Board. Board meetings are held approximately every six weeks are all conducted on Zoom. The meetings are generally on Saturday afternoons and typically last about three hours.

The job of Newsletter Editor involves organizing and inputting the various articles and other materials which other Board members contribute to our quarterly newsletter. The Editor is responsible for preparing an electronic copy of the newsletter to be sent for printing.

If you are interested in any of the above positions or would like to learn about other ways you can take a more active role in the Committee's work, please contact Roger Dale at [Roger.Dale@Tortoise-Tracks.org](mailto:Roger.Dale@Tortoise-Tracks.org).

## CHECK OUT DTPC'S NEW WEBSITE!

The DTPC has revamped its website, with the help of Sky Esser of Good Web Works (GWW). GWW specializes in web design and development for nonprofits and organizations focused on “positive change.” Sky takes great pride in “providing good service at a good value to organizations doing good work” – which made him a natural fit for this project with DTPC! Check out our new online look at <https://tortoise-tracks.org/>. The website upgrade is a work in progress, so we'll be continuing to add new content in the coming months. Be sure to visit us online often. Take a look at our website using the QR Code below.





# Tortoise Tracks

THE DESERT TORTOISE PRESERVE  
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## 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"/> \$40 Individual | <input type="checkbox"/> \$100 Sponsor    | <input type="checkbox"/> \$400 Patron          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$75 Family     | <input type="checkbox"/> \$200 Benefactor | <input type="checkbox"/> \$2000 Life/Corporate |

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 Investment Chairperson, Greg Lathrop at [2redgrey@gmail.com](mailto: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> <b>ONLY</b> electronically. (please provide email address). |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
 City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Please make your check payable to **DTPC** and mail to:

**Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee**  
**PO Box 940**  
**Ridgecrest, CA 93556**

Thank you.

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee is an IRS tax-exempt 501(c) (3) California tax-exempt nonprofit corporation. Contributions and/or annual membership dues are tax-deductible, to the extent allowable by law. Contributor information is kept confidential and is not disclosed to third parties.

If you would like to renew your membership or donate online, please visit \* [www.tortoise-tracks.org](http://www.tortoise-tracks.org) \*