

FALL  
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# Tortoise Tracks

Newsletter

## PARTNERSHIPS, PERSISTENCE, AND A LITTLE PLEADING: THE EVOLVING FUTURE OF DESERT TORTOISE CONSERVATION

Over our fifty-plus year history, the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee has learned well that no single person or group can solve every problem desert tortoises face. That's why the DTPC values the many dedicated individuals who work for and with us, and why we rely on partnerships with other groups, from government agencies like the Bureau of Land Management to nonprofits such as Defenders of Wildlife.

As you may have noticed, the conservation community is facing a host of threats many of us haven't seen in our lifetimes – possible sale of our public lands, weakening or removal of regulatory protections, and slashed funding for scientific research and conservation. But of course, environmental advocacy has always been an uphill fight; the question is, how do we face these new challenges? In this issue, we'll offer some answers, from our plans for becoming more financially independent, to our continuing efforts to foster effective partnerships. As the saying (sort of) goes... to save a tortoise, it takes a village.



Photo: Tom Astle

## NEW DONATION HELPS DTPC STEP UP RAVEN CONTROL EFFORTS

We're excited to announce that a generous gift from Bob and Christine Young has been used to create the DTPC's new Bob and Christine Young Raven Management Fund. Historically, ravens were present but uncommon in the desert. Over the last few decades, however, their population has exploded. The reason is simple: these highly intelligent birds have taken advantage of ever-increasing human development. Open trash containers, illegal dumping, and landfills are raven restaurants that never close; our billboards, transmission poles and towers, and abandoned buildings provide abundant roosting and nesting sites.

What's been a boon for ravens has been a disaster for tortoises. Small juvenile tortoises are no match for a raven's sharp bill; in some areas, the birds kill almost all tortoise hatchlings. This grant will help us augment the great work already being done by Tim Shields of Hardshell Labs, by paying for more hours of raven nest identification and monitoring, non-lethal hazing, and – critically – education outreach in nearby communities like California City, where the birds often too easily access trash and roosting/nesting spots. Reducing raven numbers is probably the single most impactful thing we can do to protect juvenile tortoises, and we are grateful to the Youngs for their thoughtful and incredibly useful donation.



Photo: Tom Astle

## THE DONOR ENDOWMENT: ENSURING THE FUTURE OF THE DTPC

The DTPC is proud of all we've accomplished on behalf of desert tortoises over the past half-century. Doing this work takes dedication and passion, and there's no shortage of either among the many people and organizations who have been, and are, part of our efforts. But let's face it, what there often is a shortage of is money. That's not a complaint; it's a simple reality. Land monitoring, fence installation and maintenance, invasive weed control, and land acquisition (a cornerstone of tortoise protection) all take cash. The DTPC is not a huge international nonprofit with a global donor base, so finding public and private grant opportunities and asking for donations are part of what we must do to keep fighting the good tortoise fight. The problem is, grants and donations are fickle; they come and go, and grants in particular can have long wait times and of course often have many suitors other than the DTPC for their funds.

All of this is why we started the DTPC Donor Endowment. What is the Donor Endowment? It is a fund created in 2015 at the suggestion of a board member and his initial gift of stock to permanently solidify the DTPC's financial solvency. With sufficient funds in the Donor Endowment, the DTPC becomes more financially independent. A goal of \$3,000,000 was set by the Board, because earnings from an endowment of that amount will allow the DTPC to cover our minimum operating expenses in perpetuity. And that means the DTPC can survive if once-reliable government grants or donations suddenly dry up.

How are we doing so far? Like a tortoise, we've made slow and steady progress. In the first decade we have raised just over \$718,000 for the Donor Endowment. Yes, that's impressive! It's a good start, but we have a long way to go to reach a comfort level. For a nonprofit of our size, especially given the size of our landholdings and to insulate us from the vagaries of always-changing political and private funding sources, we need to aggressively grow the Donor Endowment faster than before – less tortoise and more jackrabbit! Help us reach our next milestone of \$1,000,000. Gifts can be cash and/or marketable securities. We accept donations from individuals, estates, corporations, businesses and foundations. You can meet retirement account Required Minimum Distribution requirements by giving to the DTPC. Gifts are tax deductible to the extent provided by law. **WE NEED YOUR IMMEDIATE FINANCIAL HELP.**

If you or someone you know, or a company or organization you're aware of, would like to help us safeguard the endangered Mojave desert tortoise and our conservation efforts, please contact the DTPC office.





Photo: Tom Astle

## HOPE FOR DTRNA SUPPORT ROLE IN THE SAN DIEGO ZOO'S GROUNDBREAKING TORTOISE HEAD-START PROGRAM

As you read above in our announcement of new raven control efforts, the first few years of a young tortoise's life are its most vulnerable. Until a desert tortoise reaches a length of at least 120 mm (a little under five inches), its shell simply isn't tough enough to protect it from a raven's strong bill. But tortoises grow slowly in the wild (even more slowly in drought years), so getting big enough to be relatively safe from ravens can sometimes take a risk-filled decade.

Hoping to give a higher percentage of hatchlings a fighting chance, the San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance Desert Tortoise Recovery Program, in partnership with The Living Desert Zoo and Gardens in Palm Desert, is raising tortoise hatchlings in a combination of indoor and outdoor protected environments. Hatchlings are kept awake and eating throughout their first year, with the result that in one year, they can grow to the same size as a five-year-old wild tortoise! Head-started tortoises are then released in appropriate desert habitat. Pending funding approval, this will include areas within the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area.

After release, the tortoises' progress is monitored and a variety of data are collected, to help scientists and land managers learn which habitat features are most helpful for tortoise survival, so that each new year's "crop" of young tortoises will have the best opportunity to thrive. Previous results have shown a greater than 85% annual survival rate (somewhat lower in drought years) for head-started tortoises. We're pleased that the DTRNA has a chance to play a role in this innovative and promising program. Read more at: <https://sandiegozoowildlifealliance.org/story-hub/2024/07/31/a-head-start-for-hatchlings>



## DTRNA HELPS WITH RELOCATION OF THREATENED MOJAVE GROUND SQUIRRELS

Like the desert tortoises with which they share their home, Mojave Ground Squirrels (*Xerospermophilus mohavensis*) need our help. Lands managed by the DTPC include important habitat for these charismatic, threatened rodents. As part of a mitigation effort by the Mojave Ground Squirrel Conservation Council (MGSCC), sites on DTPC-managed land were prepped with artificial burrows by the MGSCC, assisted by the DTRNA's 2025 on-site naturalists and year-round monitoring biologists, Nadia and Madison.



Female Mojave Ground Squirrel with temporary ID markings (clipped fur on back, black Sharpie square on thigh), before release. Photo: Denise LaBerteaux

Two squirrels, a male and a female captured from a location slated for development, were weighed, measured, given temporary identification marks, then released on two different sites in early June. The sites were chosen to be close to Peach Thorn (*Lycium cooperi*) and Spiny Hopsage (*Grayia spinosa*) as food sources.

MGSCC biologist Denise LaBerteaux said that many squirrels leave the artificial burrows in less than a week. However, providing artificial burrows for initial relocation gives the animals a safe shelter while they adjust to their new habitat. As you can see by the curious visitors caught on nighttime trail cams, a safe place to sleep is paramount for the new arrivals!

The MGSCC and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife are planning a five-year review to assess the success of these relocations, which may affect the squirrel's status under the California Endangered Species Act. Currently "Threatened" under CESA, the Mojave Ground Squirrel may indeed warrant uplisting to "Endangered" – as happened this year with the Mojave desert tortoise.



Trail cam photos: Bruce Garlinger



**IN MEMORIAM: DR. GLENN R. STEWART**

by Kristin H. Berry, DTPC Board

September 4th marked the passing of Dr. Glenn Stewart, one of the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area's very earliest supporters and later, after its formation, the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee. Glenn Stewart was 89. Glenn recommended me to the Division of Highways (now Caltrans) for my first position while I was still in graduate school at UC Berkeley. The task was to work with the Boy Scouts and translocate tortoises from a pending construction site along Highway 58, where tortoises were observed to be killed on the two-lane highway. That job set me on the path to study desert tortoises and protection and conservation of their habitats. I met Dr. Stewart at his office at California Polytechnic University, Pomona, where he and James St. Amant, a Supervisor in Inland Fisheries with the California Department of Fish and Game, were discussing proposals for collecting limits to some species of lizards and snakes. I was invited because of my ongoing study of chuckwallas and desert experience.



Dr. Glenn Stewart (left) and James St. Amant in the 1970s, a few years after we met. Both have now passed away.

***(Continued on page 6)***

### **IN MEMORIAM: DR. GLENN R. STEWART** (continued from page 5)

I vividly remember the spring day I took Glenn, Jim, and several of their colleagues on a trip to what is now the DTRNA. We could drive on the dirt roads then (it was just a short time before the roads were closed to the interior), and there were so many tortoises to see. All of us were excited and before the end of the trip, all were enthusiastic about placing a preserve for desert tortoises there. Both Glenn and Jim, as early supporters of the DTPC and DTRNA, attended early annual dinner meetings of the DTPC.

Glenn Stewart received his Ph.D. from Oregon State University in 1964 and joined the faculty at California Polytechnic University at Pomona in 1963, remaining there as a professor until retirement in 2008. Beginning in 1960, he and his students conducted and published research papers and reports on desert tortoises and many other species, ranging from garter snakes, rubber boas, and geckos, to peregrine falcons, goshawks, and bears. One of his students, Mark Massar, who received a master's degree on female tortoise behaviors, became a member of the Board of Directors of DTPC for several years. He currently holds the position of Wildlife Biologist for the California Desert District of the Bureau of Land Management in Palm Springs. Throughout the years, Glenn remained a strong ally of the tortoise, a personal friend, and a supporter of both the DTPC and DTRNA.

### **PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE: YOUR HELP MATTERS**

The DTPC truly appreciates the consistent support and active engagement of our members, some of whom have been directly involved with our organization for more than five decades! This year we've been especially pleased to gain momentum on longstanding priorities such as land acquisition and stewardship, our popular springtime naturalist program, and a multifaceted effort to mitigate the impacts of raven predation (see cover story about the Bob and Christine Young Raven Management Fund). We've also ventured into several new initiatives – including translocation of Mojave Ground Squirrels to DTPC-owned preserve lands (see page 4), an active social media presence coupled with innovative new events (stargazing at the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area!), and conceptual planning for a desert tortoise head-starting program at the DTRNA (see page 3). These new initiatives stand not only to increase our effectiveness at carrying out our core mission – protecting wild desert tortoises and their habitats – but also to expose a new generation of conservationists to our work.

None of this would be possible without YOU! Here are some ways you can help move our shared vision forward:

- **Volunteer:** See page 7 for an announcement of our Fall Work Party on November 8 at the DTRNA.
- **Save the Date:** For our Annual Membership Meeting on Zoom (January 24, 2026 at 10:00 a.m. PST).
- **Donate:** Our annual fundraising letter is included as an insert to this issue of Tortoise Tracks. This year the need is especially great due to the loss of federal grant funding that has supported the springtime naturalist program for 35 years.
- **Tell a Friend:** Know someone who might be interested in learning about desert tortoise conservation? Consider gifting them a DTPC membership and Tortoise Tracks subscription.
- **Like and Share:** Help us continue to build our social media following – like and share our regular stories, photos and videos ([www.Facebook.com/DTPC.inc](https://www.Facebook.com/DTPC.inc)).

With best regards and sincere thanks for all that you do,

Roger Dale, DTPC President





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.



## FALL WORK PARTY

It's that time of year again! Please join us for our annual Fall Work Party on Saturday, November 8th from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., at the DTRNA outside California City.

Our spring and fall work parties always attract a great group of volunteers. These events are an opportunity for you to help us with always-needed trail and fence maintenance, invasive plant removal, and trash pickup. Plus, it's always fun to hang out with like-minded tortoise folks. No special skills required – just work gloves (and sunscreen)! Snacks will be provided.

Look for a sign-up announcement on our Facebook page [www.facebook.com/DTPC.inc](https://www.facebook.com/DTPC.inc) or on our website at <https://tortoise-tracks.org/news-events/volunteer-work-parties/>

We hope to see you there!



Photo: Tom Astle



# Tortoise Tracks

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## DTPC MEMBERSHIP/CONTRIBUTION FORM

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

☐ \$40 Individual

☐ \$100 Sponsor

☐ \$400 Patron

☐ \$75 Family

☐ \$200 Benefactor

☐ \$2000 Life/Corporate

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

☐ Fencing

☐ Land Acquisition

☐ Where Most Needed

☐ Other:\_\_\_\_\_

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

☐ \$250

☐ \$1,000

☐ \$5,000

☐ \$500

☐ \$2,500

☐ 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 Donor Endowment!***

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