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# Tortoise Tracks

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The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.

Fall 2001 21:2

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Spring 2001 marked the initiation of the USFWS range-wide distance sampling for the desert tortoise. This is the first attempt to get a range wide estimate of the Mojave population since the desert tortoise was listed in 1989. This tortoise was encountered this year while sampling in the Paradise Valley southwest of Fort Irwin. The full story is on page 2. **Photograph by Mark Massar**

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## DR. PHIL LEITNER TO GIVE ANNUAL BANQUET PRESENTATION

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee will hold its 27<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting and Banquet on Saturday, January 12, 2002 at the Holiday Inn in Palmdale, California. The featured speaker will be Dr. Phil Leitner, who will present a slide-illustrated program on the Mohave ground squirrel (*Spermophilus mohavensis*) titled *The Mohave Ground Squirrel: The Mystery Deepens*.

The Mohave ground squirrel is a rare, state-listed species whose entire natural range is restricted to the western Mojave Desert (including the Desert Tortoise Natural Area and Pilot Knob allotment). Mohave ground squirrel surveys conducted since 1998 by Dr. Leitner have suggested significant declines in the distribution and abundance of this species even in areas where there is no obvious habitat disturbance. In his lecture, Dr. Leitner will explore what changes have occurred in the West

Mojave over the past quarter century that may have led to these as yet unexplained declines. Are climatic changes to blame? The spread of invasive, non-native plants replacing native forage? Increasing predation? Disease? Toxic contaminants? Or something else? Dr. Leitner is urging that an intensive research effort needs to be mounted over the next 35 years to get answers and to get this animal on the road to recovery.

**Annual Meeting & Banquet  
Saturday, January 12, 2002**

Look for the banquet reservation form and further information on page 3. The banquet will begin at 6:00 P.M. All members are encouraged to attend the Annual Meeting at 2:00 P.M. at which DTPC Trustees and Staff will present progress reports and outline plans for the future.

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## USFWS INITIATES RANGE WIDE SURVEY FOR DESERT TORTOISE

This year marked the start of the most ambitious attempt to date to survey for the threatened desert tortoise throughout its geographic range in the Mojave and Colorado deserts. This is the population of desert tortoises (the Mojave population) that was listed as federally threatened in 1990. The impetus behind the surveys is the United States Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) Desert Tortoise Recovery Plan, which



requires monitoring of populations for 25 years. From April through June, dozens of field biologists, walking a combined total of over 1,500 miles of transects, surveyed for desert tortoises throughout its range in southwestern Utah, southern Nevada, and southeastern California. Field workers came from a diverse group of organizations including the National Park Service, the Utah Department of Game and Fish, the University of Nevada, Reno, the Department of Defense, and environmental contractors, with funding from sev-

eral sources including the Department of Defense and Department of the Interior.

The method chosen by USFWS is called line-distance sampling. Distance sampling is a technique widely used for estimating animal abundance because it uses robust statistical methodologies that do not require that every animal be seen during a sampling. Line distance sampling is so named because surveyors walk a predetermined, randomly placed transect *line*, and record the *distance* of each detected tortoise from that line. These distances are used to calculate the distribution of tortoises about the line, and it is these distributions that are then used to calculate the abundance. That's why accurately measuring the distance a tortoise is from the transect line is so essential. Accurate measurement of the distance is one of three general assumptions of the method (the other two are that all tortoise directly on the line are seen and that tortoises are detected at their initial location prior to any movement).

A low encounter rate (i.e. number of tortoise per kilometer walked) found during this spring's survey indicates that tortoise numbers are low throughout the range. The survey effort will continue next year when even more transects are planned to compensate for this low encounter rate. The survey is planned to continue for many years to come so that scientifically credible data can be collected to document population trends in the different recovery units. The question of whether range wide populations are decreasing or increasing will likely take many more years of intensive monitoring to answer.



Telephone (909) 683-3872  
 Fax (909) 683-6949  
 E-mail: <dtpc@pacbell.net>  
<http://www.tortoise-tracks.org>

### The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.

**Michael J. Connor** Executive Director

#### Board of Trustees

President	<b>Mark Hagan</b>
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**THE DESERT TORTOISE PRESERVE COMMITTEE  
INVITES YOU TO JOIN US AT OUR**

26th Annual General Meeting & Banquet

The Desert tortoise Preserve Committee will hold its 27th Annual Meeting and Banquet **Saturday, January 12, 2002** at the Holiday Inn, 38630 Fifth Street West, Palmdale, California. The No Host mixer will begin at 6:00 PM and the banquet at 7:00 PM. The Banquet speaker will be Dr. Phil Leitner who will give a presentation titled *The Mohave Ground Squirrel: The Mystery Deepens*.

**DRIVING DIRECTIONS**

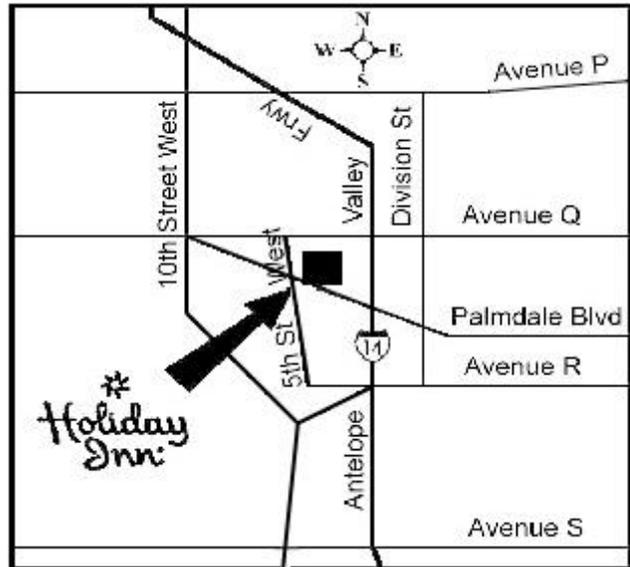
**Los Angeles:** Take the 405 N to the 5 N to the 14, continue N on 14 to Palmdale Blvd., turn left (west) to 5th St. West.

**San Bernardino:** Take the 15 N to 138, continue W on 138, it turns into Palmdale Blvd., continue on Palmdale Blvd. to 5th St. West, turn Right.

**Mojave:** Take the 14 S to Palmdale Blvd. Exit Palmdale Blvd., go west to 5th St. West, turn Right.

If you want to stay overnight after the banquet, call the Holiday Inn, Palmdale at (661) 947-8055 for room reservations.

- Annual Meeting            2:00 to 5:00 P.M.
- No-host Social Hour    5:00 to 6:00 P.M.
- Banquet Program        6:00 to 9:00 P.M.



**Holiday Inn, 38630 Fifth Street West,  
Palmdale, California**

**CHECKS AND RESERVATION FORMS MUST BE RECEIVED BY JANUARY 5, 2002**

*Questions? Please call Michael Connor at (909) 683-3872 or email (dtpc@pacbell.net)  
Or visit our website at (<http://www.tortoise-tracks.org>)*

\_\_\_ Dinner reservations at \$20 each:    \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Optional tax-deductible donation:    \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Enclosed is my check for a total of:    \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Name(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Phone Number: (\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Organizational Affiliation (if any) \_\_\_\_\_

I (we) plan to attend the afternoon business meeting: Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

**Make checks payable to DTPC and mail to:  
DTPC Annual Banquet, 4067 Mission Inn Blvd, Riverside, CA 92501**

## FUN TIMES AT THE DTPC SPRING AND FALL WORK PARTIES

### SPRING WORK PARTY, APRIL 7-8, 2001

This year's spring work party was held in early April rather than March with the hope that the volunteers could have a better opportunity to see spring wildflowers, and possibly tortoises. Weather-wise, things didn't go quite as planned, but neither wind, nor rain, nor sleet, nor snow, nor hail (yes, we got them all on Saturday afternoon!) were enough to deter the 20 volunteers who gathered for the annual spring work party at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area on April 7.

Despite the rain, a group of volunteers lead by DTPC Trustee Laura Stockton set out by road to the DTNA's northwestern boundary. When the boundary fence was erected in the early 1980's, a small section of fencing was left inside. The volunteers hiked in and removed the old fence.

The rest of the party set out in a caravan for the trek to the DTPC's Pilot Knob allotment. Getting over from the DTNA to Blackwater Well turned into quite an adventure. We usually travel the 30 miles northeast along the 20-Mule Team Wagon Trail. In the old Death Valley borax mining days, muleteam drivers would head straight across the desert from the railroad at Mojave using the distinctive Pilot Knob as their guide. This includes a couple of miles traveling over Cuddeback Dry Lake, which thanks to the storm was now a slick, slimy morass. This meant a major detour to the south to circumvent the lake. This added another hour to the trip, as well as providing a good shaking for everyone as we drove the rocky southern route around the lake.

Once at Blackwater Well we were treated to steaming hot cocoa, courtesy of folks from California Turtle and Tortoise Club's Chino Valley Chapter who had ridden in the previous day. We spent the afternoon working in the cabin area doing clean up with the major accomplishment being the removal of a long row of leaning sheds. We equaled the record of previous work parties by filling two huge dumpsters with trash. Despite the miserable weather we saw an amazing diversity of wildlife that had been using the trash piles as temporary homes (perhaps to escape the blizzard!) including wood rats, Antelope ground squirrels, Audubon cottontails, spiny lizards, Yucca night lizards, side-

blotched lizards, a young great basin gopher snake, and a tarantula.

Luckily, once the sun began to set the sky cleared, and we had a fine dry but cold night — great campfire weather! The next day was clear and mild. We hiked into the Grass Valley Wilderness and continued in our task of manually removing an old fence line there. Later, several of us went over to northwest side of the allotment to visit and photograph a population of the rare desert springparsley or cymopterus (*Cymopterus deserticola*), a parsley like plant with amazing dark purple "drum stick" flower spikes. These Pilot Knob allotment plants form the most northern occurrence of this west Mojave endemic, and is one of the few places where the plants can be seen in number outside of Edward's Air Force base.



Desert cymopterus (*Cymopterus deserticola*) at Pilot Knob allotment. **Photograph by Evelyn Moran**

### FALL WORK PARTY, OCTOBER 11-12, 2001

What a contrast to soggy April. Glorious October weather — clear blue skies, temperatures in the low 80 degrees, and no wind to speak of!

We spent a few hours in morning rocking in trails at the Interpretive Center parking lot to keep vehicles on route, and maintaining the self-guiding trails that are such a popular feature at the DTNA. The crew did an excellent job of making a "shortcut" between walking trails "disappear" by camouflage and reverse mulching. The volunteers were rewarded for their efforts by actually seeing a

tortoise. We also got see to a young racer as well as 5 species of lizard.

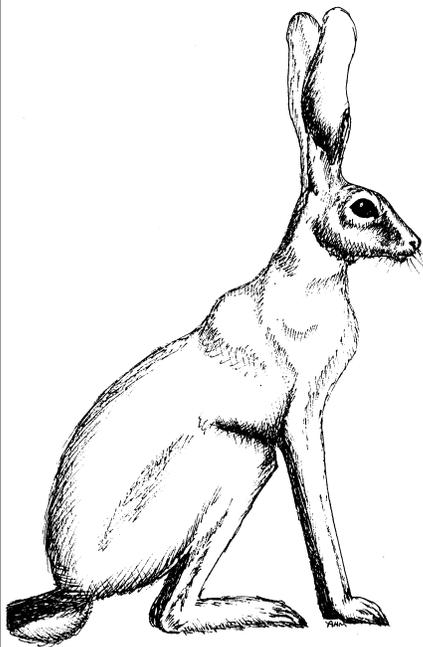
The crew then divided up. One group left for Pilot Knob and the other traveled over to the DTNA northwest boundary fence. The DTNA crew replaced signs and reattached raven proofing on 0.8 miles of fence along the boundary of Section 26. They noticed that there were surprisingly few signs left and those that were there were faded. While they were working, a dirt biker approached and asked if they had any old signs that he could have to take home! Perhaps this may partially explain the lack of signs?

This time getting to Pilot Knob was quite straightforward. The day before, BLM maintenance had been out to Blackwater Well and had used a backhoe to fill in a dangerous, precipitous, 30 foot deep gravel pit just north of the cabin area. We cleared the area around the filled pit, removed fugitive sand and gravel that were choking nearby shrubs, removed the temporary rock "walls" that had been placed around the protective fence erected last year, and raked out the tractor tire marks to discourage any errant OHV activity. Yet again the

work party filled two huge skips with trash.

Some light trail maintenance was needed to areas refurbished in prior work parties but generally speaking visitors to the area are keeping to the rocked in trails. We were especially delighted by the excellent growth of the young creosote bushes that we've been nurturing for the last several years that a clones from the sole creosote bush that had survived in the area immediately in front of the cabin area. We also made a good effort at removing most of the remainder of a stretch of 4-strand barbed wire fencing that must have been laid out by a rancher many years ago, but that had never actually been posted.

Being such glorious weather, it was a wonderful time for a camping out. In the early evening, the howls of the local coyotes (from the windmill just a few hundred feet away) and a few low-flying bats greeted a richly star-studded night sky such as only the desert can provide. Being calm, it was also perfect for the bird lovers amongst us. In the early morning and for most of the afternoon we were treated to the song of a very boisterous and attractive Say's Phoebe. The delightful sights and sounds of thrashers, finches, grackles, larks, hummingbirds and sparrows filled the day.



### **DESERT TORTOISE PRESERVE COMMITTEE ACQUIRES 25 ACRES OF HABITAT AT DESERT TORTOISE NATURAL AREA**

Good news on the habitat acquisition front!

On August 22, 2001 the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee closed another escrow and took possession of 25 acres of prime desert tortoise habitat in the Desert Tortoise Natural Area. We acquired 20 acres in section 21 and 5 acres in section 9 at the DTNA. The acquisition was funded in part through an agreement with the City of Palmdale to mitigate impacts to Mohave ground squirrel habitat.

Together with the 40 acres acquired back in January, this brings the total acreage that the Committee has acquired so far this year at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area to 65 acres! Another 65 acres that will be preserved in perpetuity for the desert tortoises and the other creatures and plants that share the habitat.

## HELP US TO SAVE THE DESERT TORTOISE

### WE NEED YOUR HELP

We desperately need your help to continue our work to help save the desert tortoise from going extinct in the wild. The tortoise is a flagship species, and safe-guarding its desert habitat helps protect many other plants and animals, and helps preserve part of our Nation's rich natural heritage for future generations to enjoy. Funding is always a problem but is especially so today in this difficult time. The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee urgently needs your support to:

- acquire key parcels of prime desert tortoise habitat
- develop and improve land and wildlife management programs for the desert tortoise
- fund its public education and naturalist programs
- fund its research and survey programs
- advocate for the tortoise in the formulation of public policy in Federal desert land-use planning efforts
- promote recovery of the desert tortoise through research, and through other legal and educational efforts
- provide a proactive voice for the tortoise



### YOU CAN SUPPORT OUR WORK BY MAKING A FULLY TAX DEDUCTIBLE DONATION

Did you know that any contribution you make over the \$15 basic membership is tax deductible?

Your tax deductible contributions are deeply appreciated by the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee.

Your gifts make us effective at conserving the desert tortoise and preserving desert lands for the benefit of the tortoise and the other wildlife and plants that share its ecosystem.

By protecting desert wildlife you are helping to protect the environment which we all inhabit.

To support our conservation efforts, please send your check or money order to:

Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee  
4067 Mission Inn Avenue  
Riverside, CA 92501

### OTHER WAYS TO HELP

- ◆ **Membership level** — consider renewing your membership at a higher level
- ◆ **Gift memberships** — give your like minded friends gift memberships to DTPC
- ◆ **Shop the DTPC Gift Store** — a selection of DTPC T-shirts, mouse pads and other products are available on our website at <<http://www.tortoise-tracks.org>>
- ◆ **Workplace giving through Earth Share of California** — DTPC is proud to be an affiliate of Earth Share of California
- ◆ **Wish List** — donate an item on our wish list from your home or business
  - Four wheel drive truck for patrols
  - Powerpoint projector for outreach
  - Scanner
  - Vacuum cleaner

## DESERT TORTOISE PRESERVE COMMITTEE

### MEMBERSHIP/DONOR FORM

NAME \_\_\_\_\_ DATE \_\_\_\_\_ NEW \_\_\_\_ (Check one)  
 ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_ RENEWAL \_\_\_\_  
 CITY \_\_\_\_\_  
 STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

Individual membership	\$ 15 annually	[ ]
Family membership	\$ 20 annually	[ ]
Sponsor membership	\$ 30 annually	[ ]
Benefactor membership	\$ 75 annually	[ ]
Patron membership	\$100 annually	[ ]
Life	\$500	[ ]

Membership Dues \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
 Additional Donation \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
 Total Enclosed \$ \_\_\_\_\_

#### DONATION ONLY

Enclosed is my donation of \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Please make checks payable to: **DTPC**

And mail to: **DTPC**  
**4067 Mission Inn Avenue**  
**Riverside, CA 92501**

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee is an IRS recognized tax-exempt 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation. All contributions above the basic \$15 annual membership dues are tax-deductible to the full extent allowed by law.

All members and donors receive the quarterly newsletter *Tortoise Tracks*.

Membership and donor information are kept confidential and will not be disclosed to third parties.

#### I WANT TO VOLUNTEER

My area of interest/expertise is:

My e-mail address is:

### TRUSTEES GREET OLD FRIENDS

Carol and Clay Panlaqui attended the Board of Trustee's meeting at the Riverside office on September 8. Carol was a DTPC Trustee for many years including a long stint as treasurer. Carol and Clay have just moved back to California after several years in Arizona. They are concerned about the condition of our the Desert Tortoise Discovery Center — the elderly motor home that acts as the operational base for the DTNA Naturalist during the spring season. Carol and Clay will be working with the Board of Trustees to refurbish the vehicle.

### EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR HONORED

Citing his extraordinary efforts on behalf of desert tortoise conservation, the Desert Tortoise Council rewarded DTPC Executive Director Michael J. Connor with a Special Award at its 2001 Annual Meeting and Symposium, held in Tucson, Arizona. Michael represents both the Council and the Committee in Federal planning efforts.

### DESERT TORTOISE COUNCIL TO HOLD TWENTY-SEVENTH SYMPOSIUM IN PALM SPRINGS

The Desert Tortoise Council will hold its Twenty-Seventh Annual Meeting and Symposium from March 21 to 24, 2002 at the Ramada Resorts Hotel in Palm Springs, California.

This annual symposium will bring together researchers, managers and interested individuals to share the latest information available on the desert tortoise and its management. Paper and poster presentations include tortoise research and monitoring, tortoise management efforts, declines in desert tortoise populations, desert tortoise recovery efforts, research on tortoise health and disease, ecology, physiology and nutrition of tortoises, as well as international issues.

Registration and other symposium information, can be found on the Council's web site at <<http://www.deserttortoise.org>>.



# Tortoise Tracks

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**THE DESERT TORTOISE PRESERVE COMMITTEE  
4067 MISSION INN AVENUE  
RIVERSIDE, CALIFORNIA 92501**

Address Service Requested



## DTPC CALENDAR OF EVENTS

January 12, 2002	Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee Annual General Meeting and Banquet
March 16-17, 2002	Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee Spring Work Party
March 21-24, 2002	Desert Tortoise Council Annual Symposium, Palm Springs, California
October 12-13, 2002	Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee Fall Work Party

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