

# Tortoise Group Newsletter

The Organization for the Protection of Nevada's Resident Tortoises, Inc.  
A non-profit organization since 1982

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www.tortoisegroup.org

Las Vegas, Nevada

## Popular Interactive Workshops Continue

Overflow crowds greeted the inauguration of the **Tortoise Group Interactive Workshops** with Betty's presentation of *How a Tortoise Works*. Betty amazed us with the ways a tortoise adapts to the desert and what we need to do in our yards to make a safe and healthy habitat.

*How a Tortoise Works – the sequel: Sex, Hatchings and Hibernation* opens August 21 with a repeat performance on August 23! Learn what tortoises are up to at this season and how to prepare for hibernation. Hatchling care will be featured.

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## “Best in Shell” Tortoises to Star in Photo Contest at September Meeting and Ice Cream Social

Dust off that camera and capture your tortoise in its most glamorous and adorable poses. Add clever captions to the photos and think about sharing your best tale about one of the photos. September will be the ultimate opportunity to brag and “talk tortoise.”

Camaraderie and laughter will prevail as celebrity judges scrutinize photos of our darling tortoises while we indulge ourselves in banana splits. Tortoise Tales will highlight the afternoon, as we entertain each other with our most adorable or outrageous tortoise stories. Please turn to page 3 for participation guidelines.

## Where's the Rain?

As of this writing, the monsoonal rains are passing by us, but be prepared--- not only for rains soon but for this winter. Learn now how to check the interior of the burrow for flooding or collapse by reflecting sunlight into the burrow. If the sun is behind you as you crouch near the burrow opening, get a helper to reflect sunlight onto your

mirror. Flashlights are okay for nighttime. And remember that the burrow is still the best place for all tortoises to spend the winter, especially if you watch for possible burrow flooding.

## Fall Meeting Schedule

*How a Tortoise Works – the sequel: Sex, Hatchings and Hibernation*

**August 21, Saturday, 1:00 pm** at the Nevada State Museum and Historical Society in Lorenzi Park and again on

**August 23, Monday evening, 6:45 pm** at the Saturn dealership in Henderson (upstairs)

*“Tortoises on Parade” Photo Contest and Ice Cream Social*

**September 18, Saturday, 1:00 pm** at the Nevada State Museum and Historical Society in Lorenzi Park

*Harvest Festival, Red Rock*  
**October 9, Saturday**

**10:00 am - 4:00 pm**  
Tortoise Group staffs its booth at Red Rock Visitor's Center, talking with fairgoers about tortoises, yard setup, hatchlings.

## Bladder Stones in Tortoises

By Lynn Mohns

Bigfoot, a large, 17-lb. male desert tortoise, was relinquished to the Society by his owner because he was fighting with another male. As difficult as it was for the owner to give him up for adoption, it was the right decision as aggression occurs nearly 100 percent of the time between males of this species. This aggression can be fatal and at the very least, it will cause stress to both animals. Stress is never healthy.

The Society routinely X-rays all incoming desert tortoises for the frequent occurrence of bladder stones. After Bigfoot's X-ray showed an enormous stone, nearly 4 inches in diameter, he was successfully operated on by Dr. Rosanne Brown, D.V.M. Thanks (again and again) to Dr. Brown. Bigfoot has recovered and has been adopted by a new family.



X-ray shows Bigfoot's 4-inch bladder stone that was successfully removed with surgery

### Frequently Asked Questions about Bladder Stones

#### 1. What in the heck is a "bladder stone" anyway?

When tortoises urinate, the urine has two main components: a clear watery part and a semi-solid whitish part. Ideally, the whitish part should be similar in consistency to goey bird droppings, but it can also be gritty and similar to wet concrete. The solid components of the urine are called "urates." If the urates are not excreted, they collect in the tortoise's bladder and gradually create a solid, rock-like sphere after layer and layer of urates accumulate. The "stone" may reach the size of a tennis ball. Some of the smaller stones can be passed if the animal is soaked properly (talk to your vet) but the larger ones require surgery. Left untreated, a bladder stone can be fatal to your tortoise.

#### 2. How do you know if your tortoise has a bladder stone?

If you see urates from your tortoise on a regular basis, and it seems fine, there is probably no reason to worry that it may have a blockage. The only certain way to know is with an X-ray.

#### 3. What are the symptoms of a bladder stone?

Many desert tortoises that seem perfectly normal may be wandering around with a large internal bladder stone. (In Bigfoot's case, he displayed no symptoms.) I often get calls from people who report that their tortoise "just hasn't been himself lately," especially after coming out of hibernation. They describe their tortoise as having a decreased appetite, loss of interest in mating, overall less active and a general downhill trend in health. For females, a bladder stone can present an especially serious problem if it blocks the passage of eggs. Male or female, left uncorrected, the tortoise becomes weaker and more debilitated and surgery on a weaker animal poses more risk.

#### 4. What causes bladder stones and are they preventable?

Veterinarians believe the main cause of bladder stones in tortoises is dehydration. It is absolutely not true that tortoises obtain all the water that they need from their food!! The following are recommendations to prevent the occurrence of bladder stones:

- A large shallow pan of fresh water must be available to the tortoises at all times. This pan should be sunk into the ground so that the animal can easily walk in and out.
- Tortoises should have a 20-30 minute weekly soak in a tub of lukewarm water deep enough to cover the bottom of the shell when the tortoise is standing. The tub should be deep so that the animal cannot climb out.
- Since many desert tortoises will not drink from a dish but will hotfoot it over to a puddle, use a sprinkler or a hose to create a more "natural" water source.
- Feed your tortoise an appropriate diet, one that is varied, high in fiber (grass, weeds, and flowers), and low in fruits. (See care sheets for more information.)
- If your desert tortoise has never been X-rayed, you should consider having it done.

#### 5. What happens in the surgery?

The tortoise must be anesthetized. A "window" is cut in the plastron (bottom of the shell) and set aside. The stone is removed and the bladder is stitched. The section of the plastron is replaced and secured with epoxy. Careful observation and antibiotics follow. Most desert tortoises will survive this procedure and go on to live happy and healthy lives.

Reprinted by permission from the *Voice of the Turtle* newsletter of the San Diego Turtle and Tortoise Society.

## Tortoises on Parade

A photo contest & Ice Cream Social

Our desert tortoises have been awake all summer displaying their mischievous and loving personalities with us humans who share their world. Now is the time to catch the antics of your desert tortoise in photographs and enter your pet in "Tortoises on Parade."

Celebrity Judges will Present:

### Best-In-Shell Prizes

\$50 - Overall winner

\$25 - Each category

**Ribbons** for Funniest, Most Outlandish, Most Mischievous, and More

Tortoise photos will be judged in four categories; captions are optional:

1. Tortoise(s) Alone
2. Tortoise(s) with Other Animal(s)
3. Tortoise(s) with People
4. Tortoise(s) Gone Crazy: **In this category only**, photos may be any size, electronically or physically embellished---anything goes !!!

### Rules

- Maximum one entry per person/category
- All entries must be submitted by 1:15 pm on September 18 or received by Tortoise Group in the mail by September 17
- Photographs only; do not bring your tortoise to the pageant
- All photographs become the property of Tortoise Group
- Winners need not be present

### Photographs

- Maximum size 8" x 10", black & white or color, glossy or matte
- Mounted on cardboard or in frame with margins no wider than one (1) inch.
- Caption (optional) may be written on bottom margin
- Information written on back: Category; Tortoise's Name, Shell Size, Sex; Photographer's Name, Address, and Phone Number; Owner's Name (if different from Photographer's)

**Banana Splits  
Whipped Cream  
& Tortoises !!**

**Winning Photos will be placed on the Website**

## Learn to Staff Our Fair Booth

The Friends of Red Rock Canyon, Red Rock Canyon Interpretive Association, and the Bureau of Land Management are sponsoring the 10<sup>th</sup> annual Harvest Festival on Saturday, October 9, 2004 from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

The last section of this summer's Interactive Workshops will be the hands-on opportunity to staff our fair booth. Learn more than you ever dreamed about tortoises by listening to our experts and interacting with the public. Even take part in setup and teardown, a vital aspect of presenting our best face. To get involved, please call Kathy at 804-0472. We really need you.

**Tortoise Group**  
**5157 Poncho Circle**  
**Las Vegas, NV 89119**  
**702-739-8043**

**Editor** Kathy Utiger  
**Board of Directors**

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The Tortoise Group newsletter is published three times yearly: March, May, and August

## Exotic Tortoises

You notice that we write very little about non-native (exotic) tortoises. That is because there is a tendency for many people to fall into the trap of wanting the new and novel. Consider that we have a most interesting desert tortoise of our own, full of personality and surprises. Adoption is free and acquiring one that is already in captivity does not deplete native populations

When you adopt from Tortoise Group, you can provide a home for one of the hundreds that have wisely been left in Las Vegas when their owners died or moved out of state, or the tortoise was rescued from crowded conditions among other tortoises because breeding had not been controlled.

Preparing the yard for exotics is not any easier than preparing for our desert tortoise. For some exotics, preparation is harder, as those that do not hibernate, like the Leopard, Red-footed, and, the Spurred tortoise (*Geochelone sulcata*). They need a warm room in winter.

Most authorities warn that different species should be kept apart. Organisms including parasites that may be tolerated by the natural host species may cause serious problems in a different host species.

## More Than a Mini Zoo

If you missed our last workshop at the Lummis Elementary School tortoise habitat you missed a special treat. Rick Watson, former principal at the school was so enthusiastic, full of good humor and constructive ideas for the children. He showed us how their custom-made burrow camera allowed us see inside the burrow by watching on the TV screen—an image that can be transmitted to other areas in the school. The students can share observations about their habitat with students at other schools with tortoise habitats.

We saw how the children learn some basic science using their tortoises. The students keep journals of behavior relative to aboveground temperatures, burrow temperatures and humidity. Other measurements include regular weighing and measuring of their tortoises.

You can see more about tortoise habitats at other local schools via the Internet. Write in <http://www.ccsd.net> then click on **Interact**, then **Community**, then **Beyond the Classroom**. This page contains other topics like Mojave Max, Tortoise Group and more for your child's interest.

**Tortoise Adoptions  
and Consultations  
Are Free  
Call 739-8043**

## **Who Funds Tortoise Group?**

We hear quite often from persons who believe that Tortoise Group receives funding from the Federal Government, Clark County, or from local cities. This is not true. We generate our own income and your membership donations are a major part of that. Thank you.

P.S. It's not too late to pay your dues for 2004!

## **Silent Victims**

Observations during pre-adoption yard visits and reports of deaths continue to come in because of entanglement in netting on the ground or within reach. This includes nets from volleyball, golf, soccer, or badminton nets, and hammocks. Tortoises can be expected to push their way under deflated toys, small plastic pools, and tarps piled within reach, or a painter's drop cloth billowed in the wind. Tortoises become caught and die silently of overheating.

Make it easy for yourself to store these items safely and quickly even if temporarily. We hear, "Oh, those will go in the garage." or "That is there temporarily. My son was supposed to put that away." When you have a tortoise it is like having a curious 2-year-old child who cannot cry out. Be watchful.

## **Summer Statistics**

Although the Tortoise Conservation Center 593-9027 is the number to call for pickup of wandering tortoises, many people call us instead. The number of pet escapes has increased. Tortoises found with an external ID are very rare.

Tortoises usually escape through the open gate. Why? Most households do not have an adequate barrier across their gate openings. The barrier should rest on concrete or bricks, not just soil and rocks so the tortoise cannot dig under the barrier.

Take a few minutes for you and your tortoise:

- Build a good gate barrier
- Take some photos of your cute tortie for the Photo Contest!

## **Afghan (Russian) Tortoise**

The number of calls we have received about the care and escapes of Afghan or Steppe tortoises--Russian tortoises--has increased. This tortoise is mainly a native of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and China. The scientific name is *Agryonimys horsfieldi*. As with many other exotic species, it is being depleted by collection. For that reason, Tortoise Group strongly advises that you secure an unwanted pet rather than purchasing one from a pet store. Call us to help you find one.

Care is essentially like that for our desert tortoises. Feed MegaDiet, provide grasses and flowers. They live outside and need a burrow for hibernation in winter and to prevent overheating in summer. A barrier between the gate posts that the tortoise cannot see through is vital. See our pamphlet, *Desert Tortoises, Adoption and Care*, free at local libraries and veterinary hospitals. We have an information sheet with additional information on this species, courtesy of the former Southern Nevada Turtle and Tortoise Club. Send us a SASE with your request.

## **Prepare for Hibernation**

As we approach fall, it's time to think of planting some tortoise food in your yard. This is the time of year when tortoises need to fatten up for the long gap between meals. Be sure your tortoise is eating and taking several long drinks.

Look your tortoise over carefully for ticks, damp or clogged nostrils, and swollen lids. If you suspect a problem, it's time for a trip to the vet. Call us for a list of veterinarians who treat tortoises.

## **Moving?**

If you are moving, please notify us of your new address---that includes your new email address. Thanks. We appreciate your taking time to help us stay in touch.



## Ice Cream Social and Photo Contest to Cap Off Tortoise Group Annual Meeting

Before we dig into the ice cream, we'll have a brief meeting of the members to conduct business, and every other year to elect officers. After we report on activities from this year, we will consider the new Bylaws. A draft of the Bylaws may be obtained in advance by emailing Betty (tortoisegroup@att.net) or calling her at 739-8043.

The Board would like your feedback on the how you feel the Revitalization Project has gone. So far the Board has 1) Presented a series of Interactive Workshops to stimulate interest and promote knowledge of tortoises, 2) Increased the number of Board members by four, 3) Rewritten the Bylaws to better align with today's organizations, and 4) Presented several new and interesting forums for bringing people together. We will take a few minutes to discuss this issue.

The Nomination Committee headed by Susan Stater presents the following slate of officers:

Chairman	Betty Burge
Vice-Chairman	Kathy Utiger
Secretary	Maureen O'Sullivan
Treasurer	Trilla Newton

## Lend Your Expertise to Tortoise Group ...Please

Our revitalization project requires experts in many areas and folks willing to take on all varieties of interesting projects, some of which are even small! Many have nothing to do with tortoises directly. We are especially hoping to find some people to assist with giving advice on advertising our program. If that's not your area, how about becoming a Board member? Do you like to organize? Do you like to work alone or be part of a team? Brainstorming has produced many fabulous ideas just waiting for someone to take the ball and run with it.

Have fun. Catch the tortoise spirit! Call Betty to get involved, 739-8043.

## MEGADIET Satellite Sellers

Please call sellers for appointment.

Charleston & Rancho	Carolyn – 878-4297
Charleston & Nellis	Ruby – 431-0576 (8 am-4 pm)
Ann Rd. & Decatur	Kim – 639-4862 (after 4:30 pm M-F, all day Sat & Sun)
Summerlin Area	Cathy – 256-3817 (3:30 – 8 pm M-F, all day Sat & Sun)
Tropicana & Maryland	Betty – 739-8043
Henderson, 89015	Laurie – 558-6985 (after 12:00 noon)
Pahrump	Sheri – 775-727-5557
Out-of-town orders	Betty – 739-8043

A 1½ lb bag costing \$8.00 lasts a large tortoise about one month. MegaDiet is also sold at monthly Tortoise Group meetings.

**10% discount to TG members  
who show their cards**

## Websites of Interest

Tortoise Group	<a href="http://www.tortoisegroup.org">www.tortoisegroup.org</a>
Desert Tortoise Council	<a href="http://www.deserttortoise.org">www.deserttortoise.org</a>
California Turtle and Tortoise Club	<a href="http://www.tortoise.org">www.tortoise.org</a>
Tortoise Trust (United Kingdom and the USA)	<a href="http://www.tortoisetrust.org">www.tortoisetrust.org</a>
American Tortoise Rescue (Southern California)	<a href="http://www.tortoise.com">www.tortoise.com</a>
Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee (California)	<a href="http://www.tortoise-tracks.org">www.tortoise-tracks.org</a>
Clark County School District Education Website	<a href="http://www.ccsd.net">www.ccsd.net</a>

***How a Tortoise Works – the Sequel: Sex, Hatchlings, and Hibernation***  
**A presentation by Betty Burge at the August meeting**

Need to learn a bit more about nesting, hatching, hatchlings, hibernation, and other seasonal behavior? Come to the presentations on August 21 (see map on page 8) or August 23 (Saturn dealership in Henderson). Betty Burge will be giving a slide show and she hopes that you will have a lot of questions on those and other topics. If you don't, she does.

We are quite sure that there will be some new and helpful information for you, no matter how long you have had tortoises. In fact, by now many of you will be able to answer the questions asked by others. You will get a chance to show off what you have learned. The children should have some questions and answers, too. And, if someone wants

to adopt a tortoise, our pamphlets on adoption will be available.

This talk is the fourth Interactive Workshop in Tortoise Group's summer series (please note the change from the previously published schedule). Don't miss this chance to learn why tortoise behavior is so different from humans, or that of cats and dogs. It's important as a tortoise owner to understand How a Tortoise Works!

Material submitted to the Tortoise Group Newsletter becomes the property of Tortoise Group and may be edited before printing.

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**Tortoise Group Membership Form**

Memberships and contributions may be tax deductible

Name _____	Phone _____	Individual	15.00	_____
		Family	25.00	_____
Street _____		Sustaining	35.00	_____
		Sponsor	50.00	_____
City _____	State _____	Zip _____	Corporate	75.00 _____
			Life	200.00 _____
E-mail address _____		Additional Contribution		_____
" Send my newsletter in hard copy				
" Send my newsletter by email				
" Send my newsletter in hard copy, and send meeting notices and other news by e-mail		<b>Total Amount Enclosed</b>		_____
" Renewing member	" New member			

Except for Life members, memberships expire each December 31

Occupation \_\_\_\_\_ Special skills/Interests \_\_\_\_\_

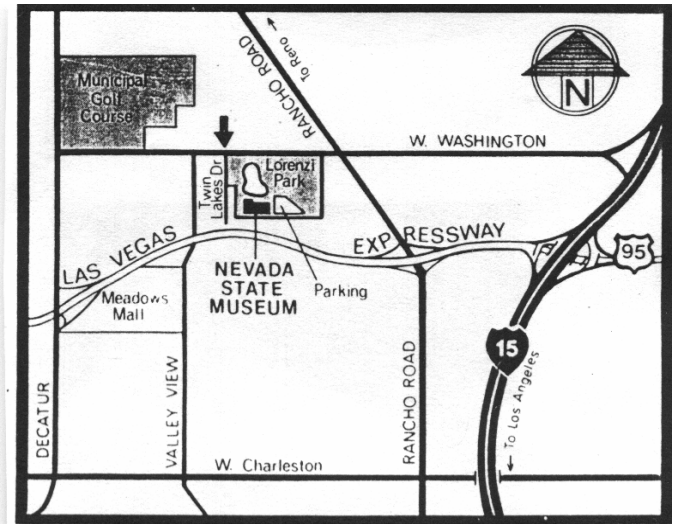
**Make check payable to Tortoise Group. Mail with application to:  
Tortoise Group, 1201 S. Casino Center, Las Vegas, NV 89104**

## Thank You, Volunteers

At the Annual Meeting in September I like to take a moment to recognize and thank the many volunteers who donate their time dedication, and extraordinary talents to making Tortoise Group the fine organization that we have today. And, I will do that again this year.

So to all of you---MegaDiet sellers, pamphlet distributors, Board members, school habitat and education volunteers, and all the others, thank you for supporting Tortoise Group in your special way.

*Betty Burge*



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