

Tortoise Group Newsletter

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

Volume XX No. 2 May 2007

www.TortoiseGroup.org

Las Vegas, Nevada

Sleepy Heads

Some of your tortoises have not emerged for the first time? It is a bit late. If you can see the tortoise, touch its leg lightly as you shine in reflected sunlight during the day or a flashlight at night. Even a sleeping tortoise will move its leg when it is touched. Sorry if you missed our demonstration at the March meeting about reflecting sunlight with not only one but two mirrors.

If the tortoise is not in sight, you can wait or you may want to consider our coming with The Snooper, a burrow probe that can "see around corners." If the tortoise has died, flies will appear within a few days and will be noticeable flying in and around the burrow area.

Within metropolitan Las Vegas, the charge for Snooper Service is \$25. Outside metropolitan Las Vegas, there is an added charge of 50 cents per mile. Call Betty at 702-739-8043.



"Alright...Who Gets the MegaDiet?" with Touché and Joshua by the Desbiens. Winner of Tortoises with People in the September 2006 Photo Contest

New MegaDiet Seller at Rainbow & Alta

We are very pleased that Kellie is ready to help you purchase MegaDiet in the very popular Rainbow and Alta area. Please call Kellie at 243-7597 to arrange a time to purchase your MegaDiet.

Online Wildlife Magazine for Kids

Southern Nevada WILD, an educational online magazine for children, is published by the Bureau of Conservation Education at the Nevada Department of Wildlife. Access the first issue at: <http://www.ndow.org/learn/programs/region/south/Southern%20Nevada%20Wild.pdf>

Please Help Us

We have a list of 32 email addresses that no longer allow us to reach you with either announcements or the opportunity to receive notice when our most recent newsletter is posted on our website. Our emails come back to us as "undeliverable."

Some of you have sent us your email changes recently, and we greatly appreciate that. If you haven't notified us, we hope you will do so as soon as possible. Just send an email to tortoisegroup@att.net giving us the change.

Donation from Reliant Energy Power Company

Reliant Energy has generously donated \$5000, which so far has been used to cover the cost of editing and printing the March 2007 edition of *Desert Tortoises, Adoption and Care*. (The June 2006 issue is still adequate.)

The balance of funds from Reliant Energy will allow Tortoise Group to purchase a DVD player and tri-fold display board for our educational display booths. Thank you, Reliant Energy!

MegaDiet Corner

By now tortoises should be chomping into their MegaDiet with gusto. Assuming the weather is good, this is prime time for tortoises to spend a lot of time browsing on grass and plants in the yard. Be sure water is available, too.

If your tortoise isn't eating MegaDiet yet, please try some of the tips listed here. And be tough. As your tortoise becomes accustomed to MegaDiet, gradually remove all vegetables or other additives. Remember, only MegaDiet contains all the nutrients your tortoise needs. Other foods added to MegaDiet only serve to dilute its potency.

Creative Tips on Introducing MegaDiet

- Soften MegaDiet to cookie dough consistency. Try unsweetened apple sauce or liquefied lettuce instead of water
- Soften and roll up in a grape leaf, rose petal or other favorite leaf (not lettuce)
- Hollow out half a cherry tomato and fill with softened MegaDiet
- Soften and stud the surface thickly with rose petals or desert willow flowers.
- Go cold turkey. No muss, no fuss.
- Email tips to Kathy at kutiger@earthlink.net



"Got Milk/Got MegaDiet," with Harley by Charles Robinson. Winner of Tortoises with Animals in the Tortoise Group September 2006 Photo Contest.

MegaDiet Satellite Sellers

Please call sellers for appointment

Nellis & Owens	Georgi – 459-1274
Camino al Norte & W. Ann Rd	Greg & Char – 649-1630
I-215 & Lone Mtn	Lynn – 655-5698
Summerlin, I-215 & Far Hills	Kathy & Pauline – 804-0472, 9am – 7pm
Rainbow & Alta	Kellie – 243-7597
Charleston & Rancho	<i>Seeking volunteer</i>
Tropicana & Maryland	Betty – 739-8043
Dean Martin & Blue Diamond	Carolyn – 876-0668, ext. 874
Green Valley, Eastern & Windmill	Ed & Pat – 269-7108
Henderson, Lake Mead & Warm Springs	Laurie – 558-6985 (after 11:00 am)
Henderson, Boulder Hwy & Equestrian	Gail – 334-0015 Cell
Boulder City, Utah & Adams	Patty – 293-7263
Pahrump	Sheri – 775-727-5557
Kingman, AZ	Toni – 928-757-8317
Mail orders	Betty – 702-739-8043

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

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

Yes, Ravens Eat Young Tortoises, But . . .

By Betty Burge

The Common Raven is a song bird and is protected by federal law like most of our birds. Locally, we don't have crows so, with the exception of the Turkey Vulture, the raven is the only large black bird that you are likely to see.

Ravens are scavengers and help to recycle organic matter like road kills and other dead animals. They are also predators, and here in the desert the soft-shelled hatchling and juvenile desert tortoises are a natural part of the raven's diet. That has been the case for a long, long time, and long ago the balance between baby tortoise populations and raven populations was maintained. However, without thinking, human beings provide additional food for ravens, and their numbers have been increasing out of proportion to tortoise populations. Fewer and fewer young tortoises grow up to fill the places of breeding adults that die. It is a simple equation that I'm sure you have figured out already.

Ravens feed at garbage dumps (euphemistically called "land fills") where refuse is not covered promptly with soil as the law usually dictates. Illegal dump sites are another source of food, adding to the ugliness and contamination of our desert. These additional sources of food are just one of the reasons that raven populations are continuing to increase. What can you do?

When you have finished your visit to our great outdoors, take home all left-over food and refuse. If you find a trash receptacle that has been set out for your convenience but it is full, just take your contribution home. Also, pick up trash on the ground that you have room for in your vehicle. Remove all trash you can from any body of water. That not only reduces the unnatural food but removes things that contaminate precious water sources and decreases the oxygen needed by water creatures. If you work or play in our wonderful but fragile desert, consider that very little room is required to carry a few large plastic trash bags in your vehicle to help you do your part.



"The Tortoise in the Hair," with Kobe (Greek Tortoise) and Andrew by the Babakitis Family. Winner of Non-Native Tortoises in the September 2006 Tortoise Group Photo Contest

Did You Know?

For eight years Tortoise Group has been working with inmates at the Southern Nevada Women's Correctional Center on Smiley Road, Las Vegas. Under the direction of Betty Burge and Jerry Shupe, a barren area nearly 4000 square feet is now a tortoise paradise as the result of the labors of several inmates.

Different women are given the opportunity to work in the habitat, the care is excellent, the devotion exemplary. Jerry and Betty find it a joy to visit the habitat. The Center no longer pays for MegaDiet and the flowers. Tortoise Group has set up a fund for these needs. At this time one adult female, one small juvenile, and one large juvenile share the area.

Spring Meeting Schedule

May 12 - Edible Plants For Tortoises

When: Saturday, 9 am – 11:00

Where: Garden Center, a blue building at the entrance to the Community College of Southern Nevada, 6221 W. Charleston Avenue, 1/4 mile west of Jones

New and hard-to-get edible plants for tortoises
 Beth Hewitt, tortoise biologist and plant specialist, has opened the Center to Tortoise Group for this special exhibition of desert plants. She will speak about the various native and non-native plants, especially those for tortoises. Featuring a guided walk through the Garden Center and an opportunity to buy many of these unusual and delectable plants.

June 16 - How a Tortoise Works, Part I: Habitat Needs and Reproduction

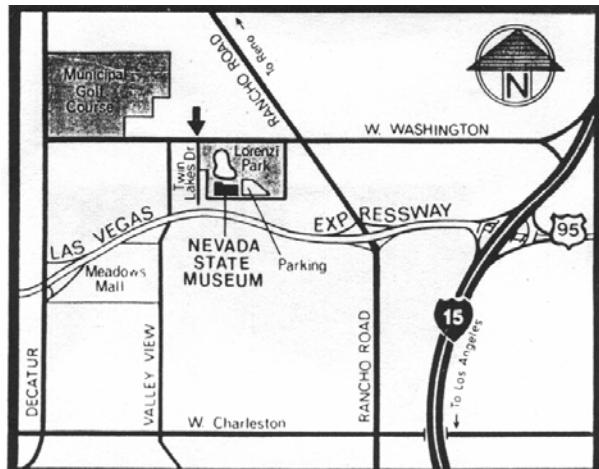
By Betty Burge, M.S.

When: Saturday, 1 – 3 pm

Where: Nevada State Museum and Historical Society (in Lorenzi Park)

700 Twin Lakes Drive (see map below)

Betty's "can't miss" two-part series on tortoise care describes the elements of a good tortoise habitat and the basics of tortoise behavior. Betty's amazing ability to help us understand how a reptile functions and to translate that into needs of a backyard habitat makes this talk a must for tortoise owners. Expect to learn a lot.



"Here's the Scoop", with Touché by Paul and Laurie Desbiens. Winner of Best in Shell at the September 2006 Tortoise Group Photo Contest

What's This ?

By Betty Burge

Throughout the season but mainly in late summer and early fall we receive many calls about hatchling desert tortoises found on doorsteps, in the street, and in back yards where there are no breeding tortoises. We know that hatchlings wander far and wide and such surprise appearances are not unusual.

In early February, I received a call from a woman who found what she described as a baby desert tortoise on her patio. She did not know what to do with the tortoise. I told her that she should turn it over to the Tortoise Pick-Up Service and was about to give her the number when she started to describe it. Yellow face, with spines down the middle of the back, which was green. I told her that would not be a desert tortoise and might be a non-native turtle. If so, the Pick-Up Service would not come for it, but if she would bring it to me I would take care of it.

Then she paused and was apparently talking to someone near by. "Oh no!" she cried out. Her husband had just picked up the "tortoise" and exclaimed, "It's a toy!"

Start Taking Photos Now!

Leave your camera handy so you can snap those adorable photos of your tortoise. You'll be thankful in September come contest time.

Dr. K's Kolumn

By Christine Kolmstetter, DVM
Cheyenne West Animal Hospital

Let's talk about chelonians today. What's a chelonian? Reptiles are divided into snakes, lizards, alligators and crocodiles, and chelonians. Chelonian refers to those reptiles with shells. This includes turtles, tortoises and terrapins. Although the common names of various species varies throughout the world, here in the U.S. 'turtle' typically refers to those chelonians that live mainly in the water. The box turtle is an exception, which lives mainly on land and does not swim. 'Tortoise' refers to those chelonians that are strictly terrestrial, such as desert tortoises. In some parts of the U.S., turtles are referred to as 'Terrapins.' All turtles and tortoises lay their eggs on land.

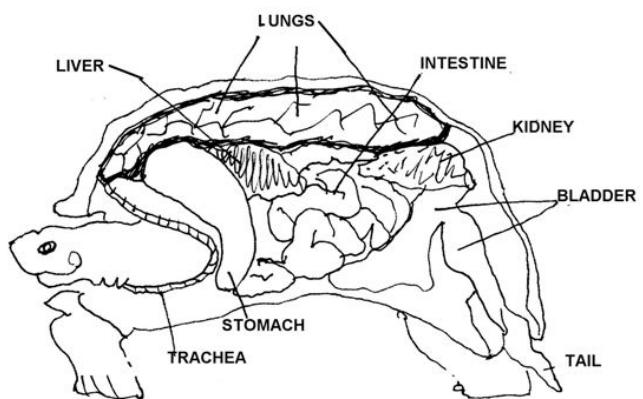
Chelonian anatomy and physiology differ significantly from other reptiles, and reptiles in general are very different from mammals in many ways. The most obvious difference in chelonians is the presence of a shell. The shell consists of an upper carapace and a lower plastron which are connected by a series of bony bridges. These bones are covered in a layer of keratin segments which are referred to as scutes. In the aquatic chelonians, these scutes are often worn down or shed. In tortoises, however, as growth occurs, larger, newer scutes grow underneath the old ones. This gives the appearance of a series of rings of scutes along the shell. These rings do not necessarily develop regularly on an annual basis and, therefore, 'counting rings' does not provide an accurate estimation of age. Because the support structure for the shell consists of living bone, deep shell injuries are very painful. If shell injuries are not treated appropriately, severe bone infections can occur.

The skin in desert tortoises varies along different areas of the body. The skin close to the shell, along the neck and upper legs is relatively thin and smooth. The skin along the outer legs is covered in extremely thick protective scales. Desert tortoises also have very thick strong nails which are excellent tools for digging burrows in the hard desert ground.

The respiratory system in all reptiles is very different from that of mammals. All mammals have a muscular diaphragm which separates the chest cavity from the abdominal cavity. As the diaphragm expands, we inhale, when the diaphragm relaxes, we exhale. If we have nasal congestion, it is fairly easy for us to nose-breathe. Try it – hold your nose closed and try to breathe with your mouth open, it isn't really too stressful for us to breathe this way. Reptiles do not have a

diaphragm. In snakes and lizards, the rib cage covers most of the body cavity, and the muscles along this area allow the entire rib cage to expand and relax, and this enables them to breathe.

Chelonians, however, have a rigid shell which prevents this type of breathing pattern. So how do they breathe? Chelonians breathe in and out through their nostrils. Muscles within their body cavity push and pull the lungs to enable the tortoise to inhale and exhale. Limb and head movements also assist breathing. Because of chelonian anatomy, mouth breathing is very difficult. Open-mouth breathing in a turtle or tortoise is abnormal and typically indicates that they are in respiratory distress.



TORTOISE ANATOMY: Notice the lungs along the upper portion of the shell, and the lack of a diaphragm.

The lungs of tortoises are very large, and they attach to the upper part of the shell. They are very saccular, comparable to a very hollow porous sponge. Although tortoise lungs are relatively large, they are not quite as efficient as those of mammals. However, since the overall metabolism of tortoises is much slower than mammals, their respiratory system is adequate for them. Because the lungs are attached along the upper shell, penetrating wounds along this area such as those occurring from dog bite injuries can result in severe, life-threatening pneumonia. Since tortoises do not have a diaphragm, they cannot cough, and therefore they cannot effectively remove abnormal secretions from their lungs. This is why development of pneumonia can become very life-threatening for these animals.

Well, there are many other unique aspects of tortoise anatomy, but we'll discuss those in our next newsletter. See you next time!

Springtime in Tad's Yard

By Kathy Utiger

This year Tad came out early for him, March 6, not his usual March 14. Several days of basking warmed him up sufficiently to begin moving around, and after a week he was browsing on the petunias. Worried about the dehydration he suffered last year, I gave him a good long soak in a shallow tub of warmish water as soon as he had warmed up.

Here at the beginning of April, Tad is spending almost the whole day outside browsing and basking. Already he is eating a whole serving of MegaDiet each day, along with plenty of the delicious young grape leaves, petunias, and dandelions.

Tad seems to be in especially fine health this spring. He has chronic upper respiratory disease and sometimes emerges from brumation with a runny nose. Not this year. He's full of vim and vigor, exploring, coming in the house, holding out for grape leaves over MegaDiet (it doesn't work), and "helping" in the yard.

Tad was born at my home 22 years ago from parents adopted from Tortoise Group. Just like any pet, he has had some ups and downs over the years. What a joy it is to watch and feed him and see him become more gorgeous, bossier (and more spoiled) with every year.



Tad basks for hours at this time of year with his head just in his burrow



Tad rests in a cozy pallet created by overhanging thyme

Tortoise Habitats in Local Schools

The University of Nevada Reno Cooperative Extension has had an active Master Gardeners program in Las Vegas for many years. There is also a Junior Master Gardeners Program. Jerry Shupe, long-time member and volunteer with Tortoise Group, has been working with the Park Elementary School and their tortoise habitat. They introduced her to the literature provided by the Jr. Master Gardeners program.

One of Jerry's many hats is creating and supervising the maintenance of tortoise habitats at local schools. She has developed activities utilizing the habitats and the tortoises so the teachers and children can continue to be involved. Jerry is doing this at about a dozen local schools. She is hoping to work more closely with the Jr. Master Gardeners, not only at Park Elementary School but at other school habitats. Whether it is a worm farm or growing flowers, the work in the habitats has become more comprehensive thanks to Jerry's efforts.

Join the MegaDiet Crew!

Help package MegaDiet in the handy 1 ½ lb bags you see for sale. Spend a few hours at home each month but contribute a huge amount to the effort. This is a job that helps keep our tortoises healthy. For details call Betty at 739-8043.

YOU'D HAVE TO SEE IT TO BELIEVE IT !

By Alison Love

This is our tortie named "Charlie." He works very hard to get in the house through the doggy door. After a few minutes, he manages to make it into the house. Then he sets about finding me. If the doggy door is shut, he'll scratch to let me know he wants inside.

Sometimes Charlie walks over to the back door and climbs up to look into the window as he scratches. It's his way of saying, "I know you're in there! You can run but you can't hide!"

Show Off Your Tortoise in
Upcoming Newsletters !

Just email a picture and story and the best photos will be selected

kutiger@earthlink.net



Charlie coming in through the doggy door

----- Cut Here -----

Tortoise Group Membership Form

A portion of memberships and contributions *should* be tax deductible
Memberships are individual. They expire each December 31

1. Please Print the COMPLETE address

Name (one name only please)

Phone

Address

City _____ State _____ Zip Code _____

E-mail

2. Check One Newsletter Option

- Send my newsletter in hard copy,
and send meeting notices and other news by e-mail
- Send my newsletter by e-mail
- Send my newsletter in hard copy

3. Renewing Member New Member

() \$15 () \$25 () \$35 () \$50 () \$75 () Life \$500

Special Contribution: _____

10% discount on MegaDiet and other Tortoise Group goodies to members and their immediate families

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

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

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The Tortoise Group newsletter is
now published four times yearly:
March, May, July, and September

Calendar for 2007

April 15 - Field Trip to Tortoise Release Site near Jean, Nevada

Look for tortoises in the wild, view spring foliage

May 12 - New and Hard-to-Get Edible Plants For Tortoises

Special talk for Tortoise Group on native and non-native plants for tortoises; a guided walk through the Garden Center and an opportunity to buy plants. At CCSN

June 16 - How a Tortoise Works, Part I: Habitat Needs and Reproduction

Betty Burge's "can't miss" talk on tortoise care describes the elements of a good tortoise habitat and the basics of tortoise behavior.

July 21 - Exploring the Bond Between Tortoises and People

Karen Kampfer reviews her PhD thesis based on questionnaires completed by Tortoise Group members and friends

August 18 - How a Tortoise Works, Part II: Hatchlings to Hibernation

Betty Burge presents her second "can't miss" talk on tortoise care.

Please refer to page 4 for program details

Material submitted to the Tortoise Group
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