

# 7 rtoise 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](http://www.tortoisegroup.org)

Las Vegas, Nevada

## Burrow Collapse Alert

We are receiving alarming reports about tortoises that are still being found trapped behind collapsed burrow soil, the result of record winter rains. You should have seen your tortoise out and about by now. If not, check the burrow to see if your tortoise can move. If you cannot see, it may have smothered under collapsed soil or be stuck in the hardened soil, unable to dig out.

Use a mirror to reflect sunlight inside the burrow. It is the best way to view the interior. A flashlight may work at night.

## Directive from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Procedure to Follow According the Clark County Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan

### *What To Do if you find a tortoise in the desert...*

Do not touch it or its burrow shelter. These tortoises are protected by law.

### *What To Do if you find a tortoise on a road or highway through the desert...*

Leave it alone unless you think the tortoise is in danger of being hit by a vehicle and it is safe for you to stop. Approach the tortoise from the front, pick it

up firmly by the sides, and take it a few yards into the desert in the direction the tortoise was heading. Set it down under a shrub, if possible.

### *What To Do if you find a tortoise in a city street or a developed area in Clark Co...*

Collect it, take it home immediately, and put it in a box inside the house. It must be kept cool. Immediately call the Tortoise Pick-Up Service of the Desert Tortoise Conservation Center Tortoise Holding Facility, 593-9027. The owner may be looking for it and call the Pick-Up Service. **You are not to keep the tortoise, put it in your yard, or give it away.** If you want to adopt this or any tortoise, your yard must be made ready first. Call Tortoise Group for help, 739-7113.

### **ID Your Tortoise: A Plea from Chairman, Betty Burge**

"I am continually saddened and frustrated with frequent reports from unhappy callers about their escaped or stolen tortoises. These are tortoises with no ID on their shells, no phone #, no Tortoise Group tag. Without an ID, the chance of having a tortoise returned is unlikely.

Yes, there are places on the shell where ID should not go, but with the aid of the Tortoise

Group Information Sheet #5, available on our website, [www.tortoisegroup.org](http://www.tortoisegroup.org), you can do it right.

I understand that some of you are hesitant, and I am truly concerned that you won't try. However, Perhaps I can help. I am willing to affix the harmless ID, without charge if you bring one of your tortoises to me. Once you have seen me do it and practiced a little, you can ID the rest of your herd.

Call me at 739-8043 for an appointment. Bring a tortoise that is at least six inches in shell length, measured with a stiff ruler along the middle of the carapace from front to back."

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## **Seasonal Tips**

**By Betty Burge**

- Want a water thrifty beautiful plant that produces flowers all summer and that tortoises love to eat? Want a plant that attracts hummingbirds and bees? Plant a Desert Willow, *Chilopsis linearis*. Make sure it is the shrub with multiple trunks, has burgundy flowers, and is low-branching. It is most gratifying and will be happy with deep watering once a week or every two weeks.
- Some tortoises continue to feed almost every day even when the above-ground temperatures are in the 100s. Other tortoises may stay in their burrows for days at a time. Don't be concerned. Have that water dish full just in case.
- As the period of daylight become longer, notice that the dandelions flower less and at a distance seeing the dandelion plants in the grass becomes harder. For those who like an unbroken expanse of green it is still there whether dotted with prime tortoise food (dandelions) or not. Those dandelions provide adequate food when you go away for a week or a week –end. Tortoise Group has dandelions for transplanting. Think about it.
- We hear that folks are freezing unopened bags of MegaDiet. Freezing destroys valuable nutrients. Refrigerate

and the chow will last for months, but do not freeze.

- Do you have a green iguana or other herbivorous lizard or baby box turtles? Start them on MegaDiet, too. If necessary, try liquefied lettuce instead of water to moisten the chow if your older tortoises and others herbivores hesitate to accept it. Tortoises less than three inches in shell length should be given softened MegaDiet.
- If you have dry ground, you can leave a few of your tortoise's droppings (scats) there. The young grow more vigorously when they can nibble on adult scats. If you have several tortoises sharing an area, the scent from scats is thought to be important in communicating social cues to the other tortoises.
- If you still have a producing female, start readying your yard for hatchlings now. If you have never been in this situation, you will appreciate your own foresight. No hauling cinderblocks and soil in August. You will have purchased the special roof tiles from Betty and installed a few burrows. She will demonstrate the technique with miniature tiles.
- Continue to include seasonal plants from the nursery in your backyard habitat. Gazanias and petunias are always yummy. Call us if you need suggestions, 739-8043.

### **Note to MegaDiet Buyers:**

Please check the list of MegaDiet sellers to see who is selling in your area this year. For example, in Summerlin we now have Kathy, not Cathy.

- The Tortoise Center will take extra babies if you have separated your breeders. Betty is still receiving starving and deformed babies that have been given away without the necessary instructions.

### **Open Invitation from the Chairman, Betty Burge**

Despite the large number of late risers this year, tortoise-related activity has been brisk at my home among the many visitors that come and go. They come for more than MegaDiet. Cactus is available for the asking. Roof tiles for hatchlings are for sale.

Visitors find my backyard a good example of what they can do to make a yard functional if not beautiful. There is plenty of unirrigated area that is essentially rock free. This provides an easy walking surface for tortoises, especially for the juveniles. I listen for the satisfying words, "Now, there's and idea we can try!"

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

## **Connections between Humans and Tortoises/Turtle**

### **By Karen Kampfer**

#### ***Synopsis of Part 1:***

##### ***We Like Each Other***

Professional literature is increasingly enriched with a more scientific study of human-reptile relationships. Reptiles have been successfully introduced in programs to assist the elderly and adolescents. Citations relate stories of tortoises showing “affection” by coming when called by a certain caretaker and not others, or by demanding a scratch on the neck. These observations indicate that attention and scratching are reinforcing aspects for the tortoises to interact with human caretakers.

#### ***Part 2: Sometimes We Like to Play!!***

Dugatkin (2002), an animal behaviorist, studied the

importance of the aspect of “play” in human and non-human species. In his observation, he noted the case of “Pigface,” a turtle at the Washington Zoo who previously had the habit of clawing his own limbs and neck, causing injury to himself that subsequently resulted in secondary infection and fungal growth.

Dugatkin noted that, “When new objects were put in his otherwise-bland environment, Pigface was diverted and began to engage in “object play.” Brown balls, orange balls, hoops – Pigface would approach them, follow them, push them around, just what you do when you play with something new (p. 42).”

After Pigface began to opt for playtime instead of self-destructive behavior, his health improved. From Dugatkin’s behavioral perspective, “object play,” which centers on interaction with inanimate objects such as sticks, rocks, balls, hoops, feathers, or other items introduced by humans, has been observed in many non-human species including turtles.

Turtles have been observed to appear to be able to recognize novelty [items] when they are introduced into a relatively constant environment. Dugatkin postulated that animals in these circumstances address the question, “What can I do with this object? (p. 43).”  
(Part 2 of 3. Look for the final part in the next newsletter.)

*Karen Kampfer is a Doctoral Candidate in Clinical Psychology at Pacifica Graduate Institute. She is currently composing her dissertation based on the analysis of the questionnaire data distributed in the May 2003 Tortoise Group Newsletter, which explored human/tortoise interactions. The above information is derived from Karen’s preliminary research into the motivations and meaning of Desert Tortoises in the lives of their Caretakers. Karen looks forward to sharing the final results of this research with members and friends next year.*

#### **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 (S. 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>
Mojave Max Education	<a href="http://www.mojavemax.com">www.mojavemax.com</a>

## Summer Meeting Schedule

**Time:** 1:00-3:00 pm

**Place:** Nevada State Museum and Historical Society (in Lorenzi Park – see map below)

### June 18

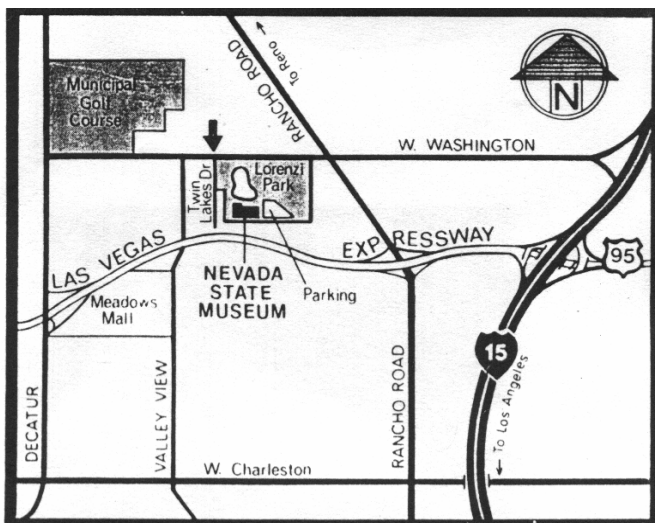
#### *How a Tortoise Works, Part I, An Interactive Workshop and Slide Presentation by Betty Burge*

Planning to adopt a tortoise? Already have a tortoise? Come learn what, why, and how to provide for your tortoise's special needs. We are quite sure you will learn something new and interesting that will make your tortoise happier and healthier. You will have an opportunity to look at some examples of dangerous or ineffective yard situations and you can provide the solutions. You will learn more about wild tortoises, too. Bring a neighbor or friend who has or may want a tortoise.

### July 16

#### *An Exotic Challenge: Keeping Non-Native Tortoises in Southern Nevada by Laurey Ray*

Would you like to meet some Greeks, pancakes, Russians, and spur-thighed tortoises? The cofounders of the Southern Nevada Turtle and Tortoise Club will show off these beauties, discuss the laws concerning exotic pets, and present some of the challenges in keeping them as pets in southern Nevada. Don't miss this special opportunity to learn about your tortoise's relatives.



**Second Annual Tortoises on Parade: A Photo Contest & Ice Cream Social – August Meeting**  
Start snapping photos of your tortoise for this fall's contest to be held at the September 17 meeting. Watch for the rules of this year's contest in the August newsletter. Please enjoy the two entries below from last year's contest.



**"I was hoping we might have a little dinner first" by Cindy Nevin. Ribbon for Best in the Tortoises Gone Crazy category**



**"Lotion me up.....boys!" by Richard Threlfall. Best Captive Ribbon in the Tortoise Alone category**



## **Two Perspectives on a Field Trip**

*by Maureen O'Sullivan*

### **Young John's View**

John's first sighting of a wild desert tortoise came during the field trip to the Tortoise Release Site in April. From the time we parked the car along the dirt road and started walking out into the desert, I could see in his eyes that this trip had awakened something very powerful within him. I wanted to go over a second time some of the rules of walking in the desert that Betty Burge had outlined, and he assured me that he knew not to step over, but around, plants and debris and to always be on the lookout and careful of all the natural habitats.



**Burrows at the Tortoise Release Site**

He was so excited to see the flowers and plants, and in stopping to look closely at them would notice the spiders and their webs. He would see every burrow of every size and wonder if it was for a tortoise, a mouse, a lizard, or even coyote. When he saw his first wild desert tortoise basking in the sun that day, he had the look of a child on his first visit to Disneyland. He tiptoed around, taking pictures on his camera, watching the tortoise's eyes blink. He informed me that he could hike in the desert all day long and that he "wasn't even tired," which, from a six-year-old after nearly two hours of walking, is quite miraculous. When he happened upon the shell of a dead tortoise, he cried as any six-year-old tortoise lover would, asking the age-old question, "But why, Mommy?"

Since that trip in April, he has taken his dad and sister to see the site and instructed them on how to carefully and safely walk in the desert. He keeps

track of every different species of animal, insect, and reptile he encounters on his walks and keeps asking when we are going hiking in the desert again.

### **Maureen's View**

On a beautiful April 3<sup>rd</sup>, nearly 40 tortoise enthusiasts traveled to the Tortoise Release Site near Jean, Nevada, approximately six miles south of Jean on a paved road and then a short distance on an unpaved road within the Release Site. Following Betty's brief discussion of desert etiquette and safety, we walked out to explore the desert, looking for tortoises, burrows, plants, and other desert critters at our own pace and liking. We found 17 tortoises, ranging in size from hatchlings to very large; several burrows, some recently used and some not; and remains of tortoises, which is normal. Remains persist for a long time. We learned an amazing amount and enjoyed a glorious outing.

For several years, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has authorized the release of tortoises held at the Desert Tortoise Conservation Center into this thirty-two-square-mile area of public land that can be visited at any time. The several thousand tortoises released have successfully adjusted or readjusted to life in the wild. Only the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is authorized to release tortoises, each of which has been tested for Upper Respiratory Tract Disease to prevent spread to wild tortoises.



**Wild Tortoise at the Tortoise Release Site**

*Release Site photos courtesy of Cindy Jo Miles*

### Three Cheers to the Volunteers

To those of you who checked one or more Action Items on your membership slip, thank you very much. We are slowly getting back to you. Be patient if you have not been called. We also understand that many of you have no time for much volunteer work outside the home.

We have noticed that the volunteers who join our programs and events do a lot of smiling as they work with us. We hope that means you are deriving satisfaction. We definitely appreciate your efforts. Responses to Betty from those helped include broad thanks for the work that Tortoise Group is doing. Betty wants you to know that these kudos are for all of you who help make our program work.

### Join in the Volunteer Action Now As:

- Satellite sellers of MegaDiet in east Las Vegas Valley, Northeast, North Las Vegas, Northwest, Summerlin, or another location
  - Photographer for occasional events such as field trips and the upcoming Nancy Glass show.
- Call Betty for more information, 739-8043.

## MegaDiet Satellite Sellers

Please call sellers for appointment

Charleston & Rancho	Carolyn – 878-4297
Nellis & Owens	Georgi – 459-1274
Ann Rd. & Decatur	<i>Seeking volunteer</i>
Summerlin	Kathy – 804-0472
Craig & Decatur	Beth – 400-4433 (evenings and weekends)
Rainbow & Alta	Sherri – 255-1357
Tropicana & Maryland	Betty – 739-8043
Industrial & Blue Diamond	Carolyn – 876-0668, ext. 874
Henderson, 89015	Laurie – 558-6985 (after 1:00 pm)
Henderson, 89015	<i>seeking second volunteer</i>
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 Tortoise Group meetings.

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

### Tortoise Group Membership Form

All or part of memberships and contributions should be tax deductible

Name	Phone	Individual	15.00	_____
_____	_____	Family	25.00	_____
Address		Sustaining	35.00	_____
_____		Sponsor	50.00	_____
City	State	Zip Code	Corporate	75.00 _____
_____	_____	_____	Life	200.00 _____

Check one newsletter option      E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

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

**2005 Special Contribution** \_\_\_\_\_

☐ Renewing member      ☐ New member

**Total Amount Enclosed** \_\_\_\_\_

Except for Life members, memberships expire each December 31

Skills, Interests \_\_\_\_\_

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

**Desert Etiquette and Safety Tips: Learned on the April 3 Field Trip, by Maureen O'Sullivan**

- Don't run, and walk only as fast as you can clearly see what is going to be under your feet.
- Don't walk backward. For picture taking or if you think you missed something, turn around and walk forward so you always know where you are putting your feet. Then turn around. Stop and look in the distance as you go.
- Don't use your hand to lift up the overhanging edges of a plant to see more clearly what may be under it. Use something like a walking stick;
- Don't step over a shrub, log, or refuse. Walk around these things. There may be a snake taking cover on the other side, a small tortoise, or a ground-nesting bird. Also, take extra care when there is dense growth of low plants, because seeing hatchlings is hard.
- If you see a tortoise, keep your distance. If you get too close the tortoise may stop what it is doing and pull in. It may stay there for half an hour, so there is nothing to watch. Very often, a tortoise will see you before you see it, and it will have stopped and be watching you. IF you get too close, the tortoise may void, losing valuable water that is needed for the months ahead. It may not get a drink until July. If you happen to hear a tortoise hiss as it expels air when it pulls in its feet and head, move away. The tortoise may resume its activity.
- Do not touch any of the tortoises.
- Leave plants to be eaten by tortoises and other wildlife or to produce seed for next year. You may collect a plant if you want it identified by a knowledgeable person.
- Along with looking for tortoises, you should also look for tortoise sign including burrows, scats (droppings), tracks, places where a tortoise has eaten from a cactus pad, or a drinking depression. You might find tortoise remains. These are not to be touched.
- Pick up any balloon fragments and ribbons, and any plastic, paper or other refuse you have room to carry out of the desert. Remember, enjoy and protect our beautiful desert

**A Visit to the Desert Tortoise Conservation Center in May, by Betty Burge**

If you could not make this event, you missed another successful outing. Michelle McDermott, Facility Manager, reviewed the history of the facility from its hasty beginning when the Mojave Desert Tortoise was first placed on the federal list of Threatened and Endangered species in 1989.

Forty-five smiling people visited the holding area and quarantine pens. We saw all sizes of tortoises. Baby pens were covered with wire mesh to keep out the ravens. Michelle noted that ravens are on the increase in the area as a result of the edible litter apparently discarded by constructions workers in this area of intense construction. There are also more fences and other structures on which the ravens can perch. As a result, the probability increases that a natural predator of baby tortoises will get ahead of the food source because of the man-made increase in food and perches.

Currently, the average number of tortoises admitted each year is 1200. Many have been released under a Fish and Wildlife-authorized program wherein healthy tortoises are returned to the wild. Presently, a disease transmission study is underway at the Center to determine the length of the incubation period of Upper Respiratory Tract Disease (URTD) when healthy tortoises are exposed to tortoises with URTD in a relatively natural setting. A Density Study, which has been completed, had to do with how many tortoises a release area can hold before disease, undo fighting among males, reduction in eggs laid, time spent pacing or fighting the fencing, and other behaviors may indicate stress of overpopulation. The results of this study should be available within the year.

The DTCC is not open to the public. However, special arrangement for groups to visit can be made by contacting Michelle McDermott at the Center 494-7453.

### **Meeting Schedule**

**June 18**

How a Tortoise Works-Part I, guest speaker

**July 16**

Exotic Tortoises, guest speaker

**August 20**

How a Tortoise Works, Part II, guest speaker

**September 17**

Ice Cream Social. Photo Contest and Annual Meeting

**Turn to page 4 for details**

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

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