

Tortoises thrive in college lifestyle: Preserve is home to 19 reptiles



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JOSHUA TREE — A full laboratory classroom of Desert Institute students gathered at Copper Mountain College Saturday to learn about desert tortoises.

Captive juvenile tortoises 1 and 2 years old allow students to study growth rings on young shells.

Dr. Paul Delaney, CMC biology professor, and Ed LaRue Jr., a field investigator and scientist for Circle Mountain Biological Consultants Inc., provided four hours of classroom lecture with question and answer periods. An hour of field work in the college's tortoise preserve capped off the afternoon.

The preserve is 84 undeveloped acres between the college and Twentynine Palms Highway. At least 19 tortoises call the preserve home. There were 15 known indigenous animals on the site when it was established in 2008 and five more tortoises were relocated to the haven during campus expansion.

Since the preserve was established, a young adult was killed by ravens in 2010. The predatory birds are a common cause of tortoise demise.

The tortoises are named alphabetically and chronologically, hurricane style, from Alyssa to, so far, Sandy. Delaney observed many of the females are named after biologists' wives or girlfriends.

At an average of one tortoise per about every four or five acres in the preserve, it might seem they'd be crawling all over the place, but that is not the case. Delaney said the animals spend about 95 percent of their lives underground in their burrows.

A good time to see tortoises is when the barometric pressure drops before a summer rain. Tortoise are bimodal, meaning they're most active in spring and fall.

For a tortoise, winter's all about sleeping, LaRue explained. Warmer weather is for romance and drinking as much as they can.

When it comes to tortoises, LaRue definitely knows his poop, known among biologists as scat. LaRue said fresh tortoise scat resembles an old wad of chewing tobacco. It differs in appearance and content from feline or canine poop because the tortoise is vegetarian and geophageous, meaning they ingest soil.

People who have spent time walking in the desert have inevitably seen a lot of holes in the ground. Identifying what animals made which holes can pose challenges.

LaRue explained that burrows with a lot mounding at the entrance are typically badger or kit fox dens. Tortoises dig a D-shaped hole the size of their shell, usually under a creosote or other bush.

Desert tortoise, *Gopherus agassizii*, were declared an endangered species in 1989, then reclassified the next year as threatened. LaRue said in Joshua Tree, 92 percent of acres surveyed have evidence of tortoise habitation. Sign includes burrows, scat and carcasses.

For the last five years each April during a population census of the CMC preserve, surveyors have found at least one new juvenile.

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