



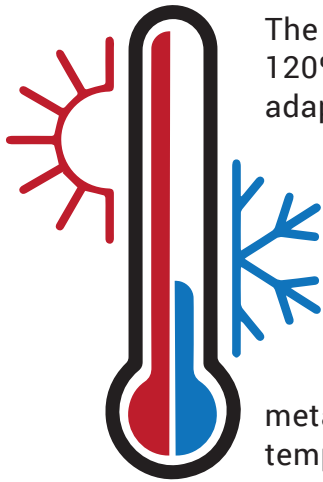
Desert Tortoise Fact Sheet

Most of Red Rock Canyon and Sloan Canyon National Conservation Areas are the perfect habitat for Desert Tortoises. These reptiles are well adapted to the dry desert, but are a threatened species due to the expansion of urban areas, predators, diseases, and climate changes.

Desert Tortoises live throughout the Mojave and Sonoran deserts. They are divided into two species: the Mojave Desert Tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*) is found west of the Colorado River and the Sonoran Desert Tortoise (*Gopherus morafkai*) to the east.



Leave desert tortoises alone and give them space if you spot one in the wild.



The Mojave Desert is a place of extremes. In the summer, temperatures often exceed 120°F/50°C. In the winter, temperatures drop below freezing. Desert Tortoises have adapted to survive in these harsh extremes of the desert.

They dig burrows to survive the hot summers and cold winters. Desert Tortoises spend most of their lives in crescent-shaped burrows typically found under bushes or in the banks of a wash. They are most active in the spring and fall and at dawn and dusk when temperatures are milder (79-93°F/26-34°C).

During the cold winters, Desert Tortoises enter a state of brumation where their metabolism slows. This allows them to survive on energy and water stores until the temperatures rise and new vegetation emerges in the spring.

The Mojave Desert averages less than 4 inches of rain per year making it the driest part of North America. Desert Tortoises rely primarily on their diet of flowers, grasses, and cacti for water. They can go for months without drinking by recycling the water in their bodies and storing it in their bladders. The stored water is important to their survival. If it is lost at the wrong time, it can be fatal.



A wild desert tortoise in its crescent shaped burrow.

Desert Tortoises also enjoy the rare desert rains and will emerge from their burrows to find water. They are often drawn to the pooled water on roads and trails creating potentially dangerous conflicts with vehicles.

Life History and Threats

Desert Tortoises range in size from 2 to 15 inches long. They are slow moving. Their outer shell is shaped and colored to blend in with the sandy soil. This combination of behavior, color, and shape makes the Desert Tortoise hard to spot.

Male and female Desert Tortoises look very similar. There are several clues that can be used to tell male and female tortoises apart. Males are often larger and have a longer tail than females. The bottom part of their shell is called the plastron. It is concave in males and flat for females. Both males and females have a pointed, gular horn, which emerges from the plastron under their heads. Male Desert Tortoises are territorial and use their longer and upward curving gular horn to battle other males.



Breeding season for tortoises is in March and April. The females lay their eggs from May to July in sand-covered nests of up to 14 eggs. The eggs hatch after 80-130 days from August to September. The eggs are often eaten by Gila Monsters and other desert animals.

Once hatched, the shell of juvenile tortoises does not harden for five or more years. This makes the young tortoises easy prey for predators, such as birds, coyotes, foxes, bobcats, badgers, skunks, and feral dogs or cats. A growing threat for young tortoises is the Common Raven. These birds have learned to prey on young tortoises, sometimes teaching this behavior to their young and increasing pressures on local tortoise populations.



Desert Tortoise habitat is impacted by fast-growing cities, livestock grazing, and climate change. As cities expand, construction damages habitat and displaces tortoises. Roads are dangerous for these slow-moving animals as their desert camouflage makes them hard to tell apart from rocks. Respiratory infections and interaction with pet tortoises are also putting Desert Tortoise populations at risk.



Tortoises use vehicles for shade, always check under cars before moving them.

Protection and the Law

Desert Tortoises are protected by federal law and Nevada state law. They are listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act making it illegal to harass, collect, or harm tortoises and provides for fines of up to \$50,000 and one year in prison for each count. Nevada Administrative Code (NAC 503.080) classifies Desert Tortoises as protected and prohibits the hunting or taking of protected wildlife. A "take" is defined as "harassing, harming, pursuing, hunting, shooting, wounding, killing, trapping, capturing or collecting, or attempting to engage in any such conduct."

How To Help Protect Desert Tortoises

Leave it alone. Tortoises can be easily scared and lose important water if startled. Stay 5 feet away. If a tortoise is on the road, stop traffic and allow it to pass.

Report it to the BLM. If you see a tortoise, get a photograph and a GPS location. If the tortoise looks sick or injured, tell us immediately.

Stop any Disturbing Activities. If the tortoise is near you, stop your activity until it moves on.

A Desert Tortoise should only be touched if absolutely necessary to save their life. If a tortoise is in imminent danger:

- Sanitize your hands and put on disposable gloves.
- Move slowly around the tortoise to keep it calm. Try to prevent your shadow from passing over the tortoise as you approach.
- Approach from the rear and pick it up securely with a hand on each side like a sandwich.
- Lift the tortoise very slowly keeping it level and close to the ground.
- Move slowly in the direction the tortoise was traveling.
- Relocate the tortoise in a safe spot away from danger, such as roadways.

