

Desert tortoises rescued, rehabilitated and now back living in the wild



BRIAN RAMOS

Clark County's Desert Conservation Program and the United States Geological Survey release 51 threatened/endangered desert tortoises into the wild just outside of Boulder City on Wednesday, October 4, 2023 Brian Ramos.

By Hillary Davis (contact)
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Tortoise Release

More than 50 displaced, federally protected tortoises are back where they belong after scientists Wednesday relocated them to the desert outside Boulder City.

Clark County's Desert Conservation Program, in conjunction with the U.S. Geological Survey, released 51 desert tortoises into the wild of the rugged Boulder City Conservation Easement, a county-managed habitat primarily for the benefit of the iconic reptiles.

Some of the tortoises, which ranged from about the size of a chicken egg to the size of a football, had been recovered from area construction sites on what had once been open desert.

Others were raised from hatchlings by the federal government, which takes in young tortoises found or surrendered by locals and "head-starts" them in captivity — but not as pets or zoo animals — to let them safely develop through their most vulnerable stage.

This gives them a better shot at thriving in the wild.

Desert tortoises are considered threatened under the Endangered Species Act. Nevada law deems them wildlife even if they're in captivity; they cannot be "owned," although they may be legally possessed by "custodians."

Their captivity is regulated, and they cannot be bought or sold. Tortoises born in captivity can be legally, privately adopted by Clark County residents through an authorized local organization called the Tortoise Group, but wild tortoises cannot be removed from their natural habitat nor are pets to be released into the wild.

Tortoises like the ones destined for the preserve, which had been kept by government scientists, can be set free like experts did Wednesday.

Volunteers with backgrounds in biology and tortoise husbandry loaded the hardy animals into plastic tubs lined with dirt and took them on a dusty, 45-minute off-road drive off U.S. 95, then carried them in their tubs another brief distance before deciding which creosote bush looked the most hospitable for starting a new life largely undisturbed.

Scott Cambrin, senior biologist for the county's Desert Conservation Program, said that sometimes tortoises are found on lots when construction workers get there to begin turning over dirt.

Other times they roam in to find builders on their home range. The county maintains a hotline so they can be notified of tortoises needing removal and safekeeping.

Cambrin instructed the release-day volunteers to put about 50 to 100 meters between individual release points. He noted the GPS coordinates of each tortoise's bush as the literal start of their new lives.

They will likely wander and dig burrows; as fall sets in and temperatures drop, the tortoises will prepare for brumation, a phase similar to warm-blooded animals' hibernation.

The county releases tortoises into the wild about once a year, and generally they have a high survival rate, Cambrin said — though in times of drought they can become food for coyotes whose usual prey, jackrabbits, become less abundant.

Robert Smith is a biologist, an independent contractor who responds to developments when tortoises and other sensitive critters are encountered, as is required for certain species. He nicknamed the tortoise he rehomed "Teddy."

Teddy was bigger than most of the group, and was ready to leave its tub. The tortoise's forelegs scabbled about as Smith set it toward the dirt, and once all four of its stumpy feet hit the ground it shuffled toward the shade of its bush — then stopped, as if unsure.

"He'll be fine," Smith said. "I told him he's surrounded by family."

Desert tortoises aren't vocal and they're generally solitary, but they are curious.

As Joe Casalino, who is also a biologist, set his tub down, the animal inside had all four legs and its neck stretched out of its shell, craning its scaly head as if taking in its new surroundings.

Casalino didn't name it before he saw it off, but according to a tiny tag on its shell it is on the government record as "EV4304." As one of the younger animals raised in captivity, this was its first time "properly" in the Mojave Desert, Casalino said.

Once unencumbered by the plastic box, EV4304 was still but appeared alert and at ease in its new placement.

"So far — good," Casalino said.

hillary.davis@gmgvegas.com / 702-990-8949 / @HillaryLVSun