

Desert Tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*)

Status -- Federal: Threatened; California: Threatened



Photo: U.S. Army, Fort Irwin, CA

The desert tortoise is the official state reptile of California. This terrestrial turtle spends most of its time waiting out extreme temperatures in underground burrows. In early spring, tortoises may be active all day, foraging on tender grasses, broad-leafed annuals, and new shoots of perennials. By late spring, activity is reduced to less than an hour in the early morning, 1 out of 4 days.

California Department of Pesticide Regulation
Endangered Species Program
<https://www.cdpr.ca.gov>



Desert Tortoise



Data Source: CDFG NDDB, 1995

Characteristics: Desert tortoises can measure up to 15 inches in length and 8 inches in width (shell measurements). Their shell is tan to dark brown, approximately 6 inches high. The head is small, rounded in front. The front limbs are flattened and heavily scaled for digging.

Behavior: Desert tortoises may be active at any time of the year, but most activity takes place between March and June, and to a lesser extent in late summer in areas with summer rains (eastern Mojave desert), where they emerge from their burrows in the cooler morning and late-afternoon hours of the hot summer months. By October, most tortoises have begun their winter hibernation.

Reproduction: There is no well-defined mating season but much of their mating occurs in April. Between mid-May and July, females scoop nests in soft soil, often at or near their burrow entrances. Depending on her size, a female lays between 3 and 14 hard-shelled eggs about the size and shape of ping-pong balls. Young tortoises emerge from the eggs between mid-August and October. They grow slowly, less than 1 inch a year, reaching sexual maturity at 15-20 years of age.

Food and Water: Tortoises are herbivorous, eating annual forbs and grasses; and prefer green vegetation over dry. Although tortoises can spend many years without drinking water, if water is available they will drink it.

Distribution: The desert tortoise is most common in desert scrub, desert wash, and Joshua tree habitats.

Current records from the California Department of Fish and Game include locations in Imperial, Inyo, Kern, Los Angeles, Riverside, and San Bernardino Counties