

Centenarian survives its harsh desert life

by Penelope C. Cox

When is a turtle not a turtle? When he is a tortoise! And out West, he is a desert tortoise.

Tortoises and turtles come from an ancient group of some 3,000 species, with their origins tracing back over 200 million years ago. They exist in the warmer areas of the world.

From four orders under the classification of Reptilia, the desert tortoise has evolved under the order of Chelonian -- a distant relative of the giant Galapagos tortoise, and is a land species. Unlike the turtle, he shuns the wet areas and is very rarely spotted near water.

His survival equipment consists of a hard armor-like shell with only his short stubby legs and tail sticking out. His head can recede deep into the shell when threatened.

The upper shell, known as the carapace, is a bony substance covered with horny square platelets, and the under shell, the plastron, is smoother and connected at the sides only to allow openings for the legs, head and tail.

The head is large, broad and blunt, but some can be pointed and

beaked. The tortoise does not have teeth, but has strong, horny jaws with sharp, bony sheaths that can tear and cut like shears -- so beware, the bit can be very painful.

The desert tortoise usually lays about six eggs, and the female will cover them over until they are completely out of sight. The eggs hatch in early fall.



a desert place

Natural beauty through preservation

Presented by:
CONSERVATION COMMITTEE of the
Cave Creek Improvement Association

Antinell - 1972-1986

Although not apparent, the tortoise has ears and hears very well, and his large bulging eyes can catch every movement. Oddly, the eyes have eyelids that close from the bottom up!

Tortoises are mostly vegetarian, but some are carnivorous, and their diets include insects, fish, lizards, plants, frogs and carrion.

All tortoises hatch their eggs on land in small shallow holes in the soft soil of hillsides, or in rotting vegetation. Eggs may be hard and with life or soft and leathery.

Tortoises can live to be more than 100 years old, so it is no wonder that they are "leftovers" from their big Galapagos brothers. Winter visitors, and indeed some of our own residents, need to be



Desert tortoise

reminded that the desert tortoise is protected by the State of Arizona. So, stop, look and admire, but leave them alone to chug along on their desert destiny -- they have learned to adjust and survive on the desert better than man.

Source: "Reptiles and Amphibians of the American Southwest," M.M. Heyman
"McMillan Illustrated Animal Encyclopedia"