

# Do you know what a gall is ?

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**PINNACLE PEAK PARK**  
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## Morafka's Desert Tortoise "Look but Don't Touch"

By Diane McCoy-Berney

It navigates the boulder-strewn hillsides of the Sonoran Desert like a little tank. It has armored forelimbs and a large internal bladder, like a built-in "canteen." It would seem this reptile is well-equipped to defend itself, but in reality, it is anything but armed and dangerous. In fact, it is one of the most docile and endearing animals in the desert. "It" is the desert tortoise and "it" is in danger.



Desert tortoises have many characteristics that enable them to survive 80 or more years in a harsh desert environment. They metabolize most of their water from the plants they eat and store it in their large bladder, thus enabling adult tortoises to survive for a year without a drink of water! They can retract their head, feet and tail into their hard shell for protection. Tortoises also have a great sense of direction and recognize important landmarks leading to burrows, pallets (resting sites) and food locations within their home range.

Unfortunately, these characteristics are not enough to keep desert tortoises thriving in today's fast-changing world of habitat loss. Environmental threats include development, roadways, irresponsible off-road vehicle use, wildfires and illegal collecting,

Additionally, Upper Respiratory Tract Disease (URTD) can be transmitted to wild tortoises when captive tortoises are set free. These factors, coupled with the tortoise's slow-moving pace, all contribute to their continuing population decline. The desert tortoise population living south and east of the Colorado River in Arizona and Mexico was recently reclassified as its own species, *Gopherus morafkai*. These tortoises have been protected by Arizona law since 1988. Its Mojave desert cousin, *Gopherus agassizii*, living north and west of the Colorado River has been on the Federal "threatened" list since 1990, the final designation before "endangered."

What can you do to help? If you should encounter a desert tortoise in the wild, DO NOT touch it

or pick it up! Doing so may cause the tortoise to use a defense mechanism designed to startle a predator— emptying its bladder of stored fluids. Handling the tortoise causes stress and may lead to dehydration and death during drought if an adequate source of moisture is not available. You also can help by never releasing captive tortoises into the wild. They may carry URTD that can infect wild tortoises. Instead, research Desert Tortoise Adoption Programs (TAP) and local Game and Fish Departments online for appropriate alternatives. Important information is available at <http://www.desertmuseum.org/programs/tap.php>. Let's all work together to keep this docile and endearing reptile lumbering across desert lands for future generations!



Go green—sign up to receive the newsletter and event announcements by email at [www.PinnaclePeakPark.com](http://www.PinnaclePeakPark.com)

### The Friends of Pinnacle Peak Park

is dedicated to assist in maintaining the wonderful character of the Park and to support improvements and educational activities through fundraising.

Tax deductible contributions to support the Friends mission may be mailed or madethrough the website

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