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Natural History Notes: Testudines

GOPHERUS AGASSIZII (Desert Tortoise). Predation. A variety of predators, most notably coyotes (*Canis latrans*) and Common Ravens (*Corvus corax*) have been reported to prey on hatchling desert tortoises (Ernst et al. 1994. Turtles of the United States and Canada. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C. 578 pp.). Here, we report an observation of a hatchling tortoise, fitted with a radiotransmitter, that was preyed upon by native fire ants (*Solenopsis* sp.) in the eastern Mojave Desert at Yucca Mountain, Nevada (36°50'N, 116°25'E). On 8/27/94, tortoise #9315 (carapace length = 45 mm, age = 5 d) was found alive with eyes, chin, and parts of the head and legs being eaten by ants. The tortoise was alive, but lethargic, and responded little when touched. Eight of 74 other radiomarked hatchlings monitored at Yucca Mountain during 1992-1994 were found dead with fire ants on their carcass 3-7 days after the hatchlings emerged from their nests. It is not known whether those tortoises were killed by ants or were being scavenged when found. While imported fire ants (*S. invicta*) have long been known to kill hatchling gopher tortoises (*G. polyphemus*; Mount 1981. J. Alabama Acad. Sci. 52:71-78), native fire ants have previously not been implicated as predators of desert tortoises. However, only 1 of 75 (or at worst 9 of 75) was killed by fire ants, suggesting that although fire ants do kill hatchlings, they were not important predators on desert tortoises during this study. Tortoise specimens were deposited at the University of California at Berkeley.

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