

TINY TORTOISE TALE

by Lenore Snodey & Peter Landecker

October 7, 1990. The news reached me through a phone call at work from home: "There are 4 baby tortoises in the back yard!" My emotions bounced from incredulity to elation! "How fantastic!" Then, "Are any of the adult tortoises acting like parents?" I asked facetiously. A fellow worker queried doubtfully, "Turtles don't nurse do they?" Poor city dweller.

The original long-term couple of our four adult desert tortoises had produced eggs in previous years, but none had hatched even though nurtured in scientific conditions of temperature, moisture and humidity. But the desert-like heat and drought of 1990 worked the magic of viability on these eggs in their secret underground nest.

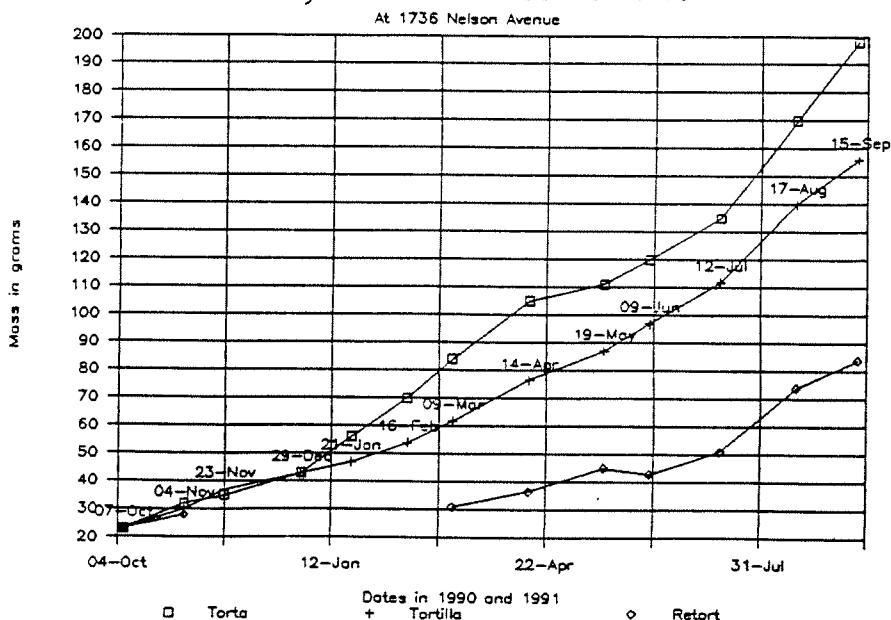
While the adult tortoises continued self-sufficient lives, oblivious to the hatchlings, Peter and I became enthusiastic, if bewildered, grandparents to these intrepid tiny creatures. Hurried consultations with tortoise Club members oriented us to basic care measures to take. I began chopping vegetables and fruits every morning before work, while water-soaked, calcium enhanced guinea pig food pellets and tofu became staples in the fridge. Weekly outdoor sunny morning vitamin-enhanced baths were a fascinating event! Peter prepared a shelter in the backyard, surrounded by wire mesh to prevent their escape or predation by birds or our cat. Their passion for unrestricted movement was immediately evident. They ceaselessly trudged around the shelter looking for escape routes. To provide them with greater freedom, we placed them in our walled square foot garden while we worked nearby, doing a shell count on them frequently. Within an hour, the count was only three. Perhaps the missing tortoise was a good hider. A short time later when he was found 20 feet away in the grass (how could he have crawled across a 15 foot driveway without our noticing?), we realized he had actually climbed an aloe vera leaf to the top of the garden wall, fallen 12 inches to the cement unharmed, and

made his dash to freedom. Vegetation was trimmed back from the garden wall.

When temperatures began to dip into the 60s at night, we brought them into the house to sleep in an aquarium. Every day I went through the ritual of early morning food preparation, carrying the babies out to the shelter, and securing it before leaving for work. In the evening, I would basket-carry them to a neighbor's yard for grass-running in the late afternoon sunshine. One morning I secured the shelter as usual, checking to make sure they were safely enclosed and protected from danger. On returning from work, I immediately checked on them. Only three could be found. My frantic search finally concluded with the tragic discovery of a healthy, freedom-seeking baby tortoise caught 6 inches high in the air in the protective wire mesh. I suffered as if from sudden infant death syndrome. My feelings of maternal loss surprised me.

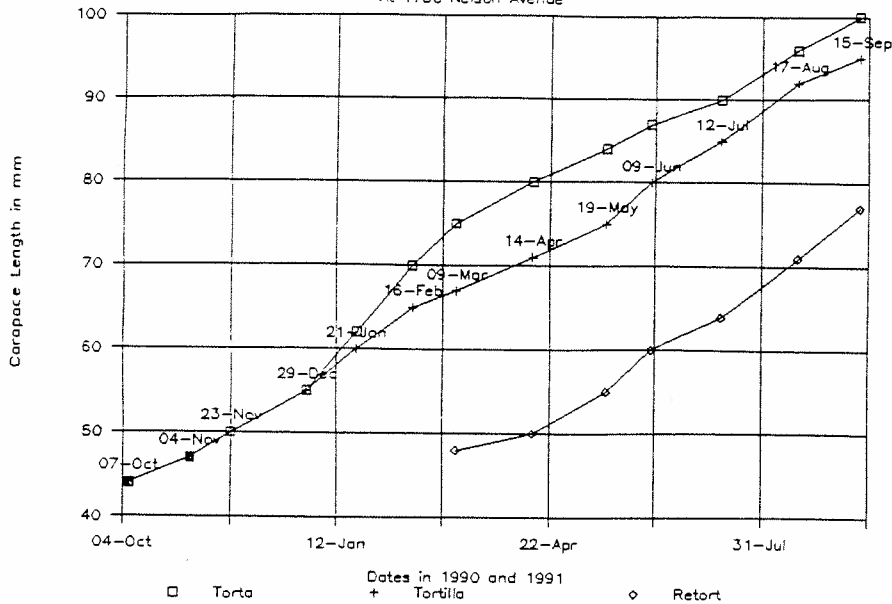
Efforts to ensure the safety of the remaining three were intensified. In spite of that, in late November 1990 another tortoise disappeared from the garden. We fine-tooth combed the backyard, spent hours searching in the ivy, but no baby was found. Another period of

Baby Tortoise Mass vs Time



Baby Tortoise Length vs Time

At 1736 Nelson Avenue



grieving followed. The two surviving toddlers lived in the aquarium during the winter, growing and thriving on the diet we provided. We assumed that the missing one could not survive the cold and rains of winter.

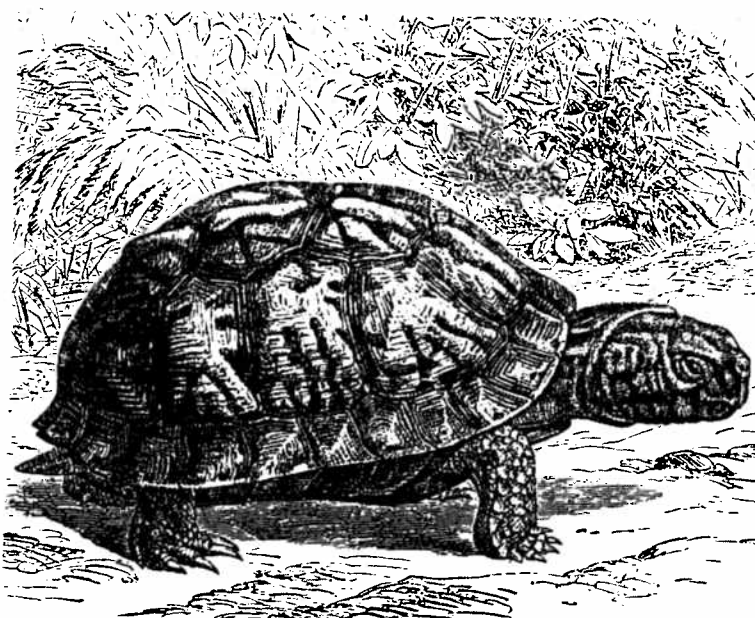
Peter, the scientist, had begun keeping a careful record of the tortoises' mass and length on the day of hatching. Each one initially weighed 23 grams and had a carapace 44 millimeters in length. In the spring of 1991, the "twins" were in the garden during daylight

hours, and indoors at night. One March morning an amazed Peter spotted the 3rd baby tortoise in the yard. he was almost the same size as when he disappeared, with a pale shell. With great delight, we reunited him with his siblings, taking utmost precaution to prevent his escape again. Now all three were named, and measurements compared. Torta, the biggest, weighed 84 grams with a length 80 mm; Tortilla, 62 grams, 71 mm length; and tiny Retort, 31 grams and 50 mm long. Slowly over the summer, the trio grew, prospered, adapted to their garden environment, and gave us joy! On September 15, 1991, after 6 months of continuous, healthful, outdoor living in the garden, their mass and length were, respectively, 198 grams, 100 mm; 156 grams, 95 mm; and 84

grams, 77 mm. The changes in size and weight of the hatchlings as they grew are shown in the graphs.

Having recently been given another adult female, we now have 2 adult female and 3 adult male tortoises in our backyard, all registered with California Department of Fish & Game. The three toddlers are thriving. We love our tortoises!

Lenore and Peter live in Manhattan Beach, California. 🐢



FROM YOUR EDITOR

Volunteers are needed to help compile material for regular news, conservation, legislation, or husbandry features in *the Tortuga Gazette*. Articles, turtle of the month features, short stories or tidbits, photographs and suggestions for improvement are also needed. Call Mike at (818) 345-0425 if you can help.

MAKE YOUR TURTLE FAMOUS!

Turtle of the Month for December is your favorite turtle. Send in your photographs to: Editor, P.O. Box 7300, Van Nuys, CA 91409-7300 Because of the expense, only a limited number of photographs can be printed. Send well focussed shots that will look good in black and white!