

Field Trip for 44th Annual Desert Tortoise Council Symposium



This image is one of the places that some of our groups may go. On November 26 of the year 2000, this Gila Monster was pulled from his overwintering site, processed, bled for DNA, photographed, and released. He did not return to the site he was pulled from for four years! It is rare to have one *ever* return once it has been removed for any reason. That is the reason for "hands off" today.



This image, taken exactly ten years later on 26 November 2010, shows the exact same Gila Monster in the exact same hole that he was pulled from. We hope that this one, and some other old friends, will entertain us as part of our field trip.

Detailed Guidelines on the Desert Tortoise Council's Gila Monster Field Trip

Prepared by Roger A. Repp repproger22@gmail.com, approved by heaven knows how many people.

Please do not check the “I read this” box on the form without reading this letter first. There are many important tidbits within this letter that will help assure a great day for all. (Including the organizers!)

When: February 20, 2019, 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM (Door to door at Westward Look)

Where: The majority of participants will leave the Westward Look after we go over all the information on this letter. ***Please*** read and understand this “Guideline letter” ahead of time, and we will all get out the door quicker.

Purpose: To have fun, see a wild Gila Monster (*Heloderma suspectum*—hereafter referred to as HESU), and assist future efforts in monitoring the herpetofauna in the places that we visit. There is a strong chance that the participants of this field trip will find some new study animals.

History of the study: A small group of herpetologists have been studying the overwintering phenomena of site fidelity with HESU, three species of rattlesnakes (*Crotalus atrox*, *C. tigris*, and *C. molossus*), Western Lyresnakes (*Trimorphodon lambda*), Common Chuckwallas (*Sauromalus ater*), and Sonoran Desert Tortoises (*Gopherus morafkai*). The studies have covered a wide range of methodology from using photography to identify individuals at their shelters (which will be our method), as well as mark and recapture, and radio-telemetry. Two of the places that we will visit today have been under watch since 1992. What has been learned through the years is that to pull *any* species of reptile from their overwintering sites for *any* reason is to risk driving them away permanently. (Repp, data published in too many places to enumerate here). That is the reason we will *not* be touching anything that is in a shelter today.

The ***ultimate edict*** of this field trip is: *Please enjoy your day here, and then forget about the exact locations revealed. Further visits on your part can and will disrupt what we are trying to accomplish. Please help us keep the places and animals viewed today as pristine as possible by staying away from them in the future. Thanks!*

Edict number 2: Everybody arrives on the Vigas Patio at 0800 SHARP, with food in their stomachs, ready to walk out the door and go! Have *everything* you need for the day with you.

Edict number 3: There will be *no* habitat disturbance, and *no* collecting of reptiles allowed on this field trip.

Further Guidelines:

1. Remember that every place that we go has Africanized bees (“killer bees”). ***Do*** thoroughly read the link provided about them that can be found on the same form that led you here.

2. While we stop short at a strict dress code, long pants, sturdy hiking boots, a light colored hat, and light colored clothing is strongly suggested. Sun screen is advised. Did you read the killer bee website yet?

Note: Dark sunglasses greatly hampers your ability to see creatures that are *all* in the shade while bright sunlight surrounds you.

3. By design, lunch will not be served until 2 PM. Bring plenty of fluids (one liter each) and snacks to tide you over. You *must* be able to carry everything you will need until lunch.
4. After the pre-field trip instructions (this guideline letter), we will split three caravans. Each caravan will have a lead driver who will know our destinations. Once there, you will meet you guides for the day.
5. The guides have been instructed to keep all who are interested in seeing any HESU in a tight group once the group is close to the HESU Zone. Please cooperate with the guides at all times!
6. Each group will have a group photographer. This person must have the equipment and skill level to **quickly** snap an image of a HESU basking at a distance of 50 feet. This ability, and a total willingness to share the image with his or her group, is required. Full body images are especially helpful to those conducting the study. (See image numbers 1 and 2 at the top of this page. Any photos Repp receives will be carefully matched with others from the area). We are looking for people who are willing and able to selflessly donate their skills. Repp will ask for those who volunteered through the registration form at the Westward Look.
7. As soon as they see any one of you, the HESU will slip back into their holes. At this point, you may approach—one at a time—to take any pictures. Your camera must not get any closer than three feet of the shelter, and *do not talk into the hole!* (We are trying *not* to scare them away).
8. HESU have *excellent* hearing. The guide will initiate a “silence zone” at the proper distance from the HESU zone. If you *really* want to see them, you will be wise to stay quiet on request.
9. Roger Repp is 64 years old, has a bad back, is 30 lbs overweight, yet he **can** (barely) do the most difficult of the places you will go today. At the parking spots, your guide will point to where the HESU are. Know your limits! If you don’t think you can make it, stay on comfortable ground and try to find us something noteworthy there. (Remember—there are *many* different types of reptiles at each place we go. Bonus herps are *always* appreciated).

10. At the point of arriving at any given parking spot, the guide will allow his or her group two options. One group is to be guided directly to the known HESU, the other is encouraged to explore to try to find new animals.
11. Know that each group will have a shot at known HESU. At the proper time, the guides will lead us all to the last stop for lunch. Once we eat, we will have time to figure out who has yet to see a wild HESU, and go get them one!
12. A Gila Monster will be brought for those who wish to photograph one in a scenic backdrop at our lunch stop.
13. Be thinking of your hiking ability on the terms of 1 to 3—3 being the most difficult. While every stop is a 1 if you limit yourself to your capabilities, there are only two known locations where a “1” gets you to the HESU. At this point in the pre-field trip festivities, Repp will ask you to commit to your hiking level, and do his best to accommodate you.
14. Repp will also ask for those who have never seen a wild HESU to raise their hands. Even if you have already indicated this fact on the form—raise your hands anyway!
15. Be ready to break into groups of four in as efficient manner as possible at departure. If you already know who you want to be with, gather together **NOW**, and hang close to your desired people.

The caravans will initially go to three places:

East Buttes of Ragged Top: 24 people, including guides. Arrive at ~0930, leave for Iron Mine Hill at 1300

Iron Mine Hill, Suizo Mountains: 24 people, including guides. Arrive at ~0930 and stay until lunch--which is at 1400

Hill Top and Gila Knob, 96 Hills: 16 people, including guides. Arrive at ~1000, leave for Iron Mine Hill at 1300

Lunch is at 1400, “Shady Spot” of Iron Mine Hill, Suizo Mountains.

I hope to cover all this in 15 minutes before we roll. It will greatly help if you all read and understand these directions ahead of time. Thanks!