

Threats

The greatest threat to the survival of the gopher tortoise is habitat destruction. Tortoises cannot live if they do not have undeveloped land with plenty of food and room to dig their burrows. Another less obvious threat that is related to development is land fragmentation. Buildings, roads, and other infrastructure inhibit the natural movements of the gopher tortoise leaving them vulnerable to human activity and vehicular traffic.



Road mortality is believed to be one of the greatest causes of adult tortoise deaths.

In east-central Florida, land fragmentation has another effect that indirectly harms

Threatened by development tortoises. When the land is broken up by concrete, it can no longer burn in a natural manner. After a few years without fire, much of the habitat becomes unsuitable for tortoises.

Upon locating a dead, injured, or sick specimen of any covered species or any other threatened or endangered species notification should be made as soon as possible to the:

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1-352-429-1037; AND**

**Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation
Commission 1-888-404-3922**

How you can help

Discourage friends and neighbors from taking tortoises or moving them to new homes. Although a person might feel he is doing the right thing by rescuing a tortoise from a bad situation, there are many reasons why it is not a good practice. Tortoise questions can be referred to the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission at **1-888-404-3922**.

Remember that conservation of land is not enough; in order for land to be truly conserved, it must be properly managed. Palm Bay supports the purchase of large tracts of land through an environmental service fee that is levied on each new building permit.

Report malicious destruction or harassment of gopher tortoises or their burrows. **Call FFWCC toll-free: 1-888-404-3922**

Gopher Tortoise Permits

For information regarding FFWCC gopher tortoise permits please contact:

Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission
Species Conservation Planning Section
620 South Meridian St., MS 2A
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-1600
1-850-921-5990, Ext. 17310
<http://myfwc.com/permits/protected-wildlife/permits.html#gophertortoise>

For more information please contact:
City of Palm Bay
Building Division
Phone: 321-953-8924
Email: pbldg@palmbayflorida.org
Website: www.palmbayflorida.org



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Gopher Tortoises

**A Species of
Special Concern**



Protection

The gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) averages 9-11 inches, but can attain lengths of 15 inches. They can weigh up to 15 pounds. The gopher tortoise occurs throughout Florida but



Gopher Tortoise

prefers sandy, well drained upland areas. It eats grasses, bean-family plants, fruits, and grass-like plants of the sunflower family. They excavate burrows averaging 15 feet in length, but some burrows can be up to 48

feet long and about six feet deep. Gopher tortoise burrows may be used by many other species, including the Florida mouse and indigo snake.

In Florida, the gopher tortoise is a species of special concern, and it is illegal to take, possess, transport, or sell gopher tortoises, or their eggs, except as authorized by the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission (FFWCC). Permits from the FFWCC are required to relocate tortoises.



Natural History

Gopher tortoises belong to a group of land tortoises that originated in western North America nearly 60 million years ago. At least 23 species of these tortoises are known to have existed on our continent since that time, but only four remain today. Only the gopher tortoise occurs east of the Mississippi River.

A gopher tortoise's life revolves around its burrow, which can be up to 48 feet in length and six feet in depth. The tortoise digs its burrow with its shovel-like front legs. The width of the burrow is approximately the same as the tortoise's length, allowing the tortoise to turn around anywhere in its burrow.

Gopher tortoises feed mainly on low-growing plants that require abundant sunlight to grow well. Although wiregrass, broadleaf grasses and legumes are the most important foods, tortoises also eat gopher apples, pawpaws, blackberries, saw palmetto berries and other fruits when available.

Habitat



Gopher Tortoise Habitat

Gopher burrows are the life-blood of dry, sandy uplands. Because these environments are desert-like, the burrows, which remain at fairly constant temperatures and high humidity throughout the year, provide an escape from the cold, heat and dryness for the gopher and other

animals. They also act as refuge for other animals from periodic, regenerative fires that occur in these scrubby, dry habitats.

Identification

The gopher tortoise is a large, dark-brown to grayish-black terrestrial turtle with elephantine hind feet, shovel-like forefeet, and a chin projection beneath the head on the yellowish, hingless undershell. The sex of individual turtles can usually be determined by shell dimensions. A male turtle has a greater degree of lower shell concavity and a longer chin projection. However, the sex of tortoises at maturity size is difficult to determine.

Tortoises normally mate during April and May. Several weeks after mating, female tortoises lay 3-15 eggs. A mature female generally produces one clutch of eggs annually. However, because of high losses of nests to predators, her eggs may actually survive as infrequently as once in every 10 years.

Once a hatchling is too big to be swallowed easily they are thought to live in excess of 40 years.

