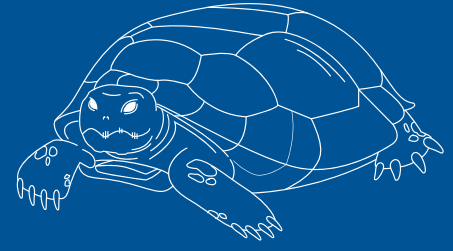


# GOPHER TORTOISE

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Wildlife of Florida Factsheets

Florida's Keystone Species



**SCIENTIFIC NAME** *Gopherus polyphemus*

**COMMON NAME** gopher tortoise

**HABITAT** Well-drained sandy areas with little tree cover and abundant herbaceous groundcover

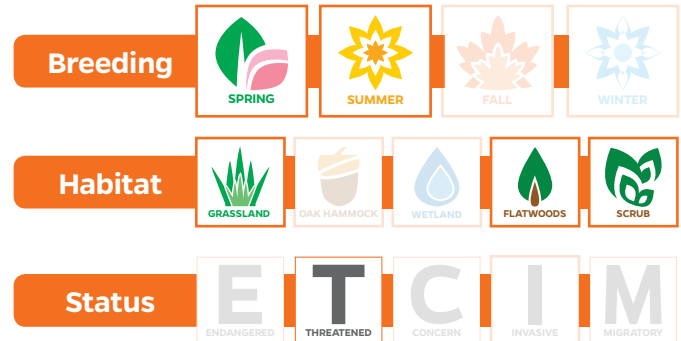
**PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION** Terrestrial tortoise, adults typically 10–15 inches long with an oblong brown or gray shell. Short but strong elephant-like back legs and shovel-like front legs to help dig.

**WEIGHT** 8–15 lbs.

**REPRODUCTIVE RATE** Clutch sizes range from 3 to 15 eggs with an average clutch size of 5–8. Eggs hatch after 80–100 days depending on temperature.

**LIFESPAN** 40–80 years and possibly older in the wild, up to 100 years in captivity.

**DISPERSAL & HOME RANGE** Although gopher tortoises are capable of moving long distances (0.6 mi), they are generally quite sedentary, and little is known about their dispersal. Home range varies with habitat, season, and sex of tortoise, but males move more frequently and have larger home ranges than females. Different studies have reported annual average home ranges of 1–114 acres for males and 0.2–14 acres for females.



**BIOLOGY AND BEHAVIOR** Gopher tortoises are most active from April–October and on warm winter days in southern Florida. They live in excavated burrows that average 15 feet long and 6.5 feet deep and provide shelter from weather, fire, and predators. Burrows have a single entrance, about as wide as the tortoise is long, and are easy to spot by the sandy “aprons” at the entrances. Gopher tortoises are herbivores and feed on low-growing vegetation such as grasses, legumes, and other herbaceous plants. They get most of their water by eating plants and seek water to drink only in a drought. They reach sexual maturity at about 10–15 years of age and mature faster in areas where food is abundant. During the breeding season, males visit female burrows within a colony and court them by bobbing their heads, nipping at the their shells, and rubbing against them to distribute pheromones from scent glands on their legs. Females lay eggs in the sand of their burrow aprons or in another open, sunny spot. Predation of eggs and hatchlings is high. Females may only have one successful clutch every 10 years.

## Did you know?

Gopher tortoises are a keystone species, meaning other animals depend on them for survival. The burrows created by gopher tortoises are used by more than 350 other species, called commensals, including the burrowing owl, Florida mouse, gopher frog, and eastern indigo snake.

# GOPHER TORTOISE FAST FACTS

- Gopher tortoises feed on a variety of plants and also spread and fertilize seeds through their dung.
- Gopher tortoises cannot swim! Never relocate a tortoise to water.
- The longest recorded gopher tortoise burrow was over 47 feet long!



States and counties with Gopher Tortoise populations.

## HISTORY & DISTRIBUTION

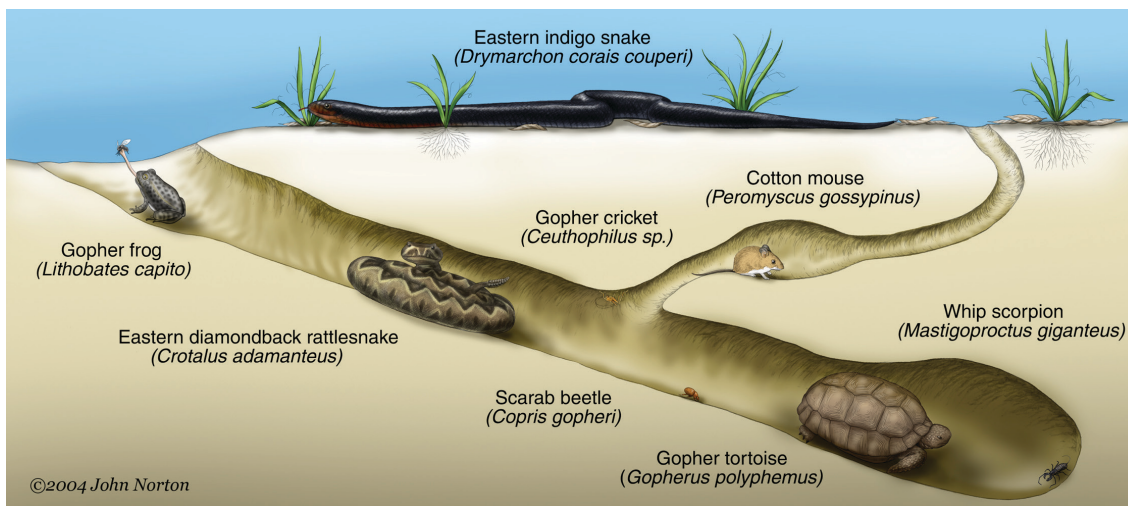
Gopher tortoises descended from a species of land tortoise that occupied western North America about 60 million years ago. Today, only five tortoise species remain in North America,

and the gopher tortoise is the only one that occurs east of the Mississippi River. Human activities and loss of habitat have eliminated the gopher tortoise from parts of its historic range in North Carolina, northern Alabama, western Louisiana, and eastern Texas.

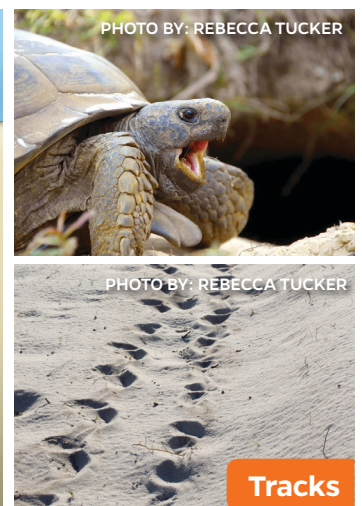
**THREATS** Habitat loss from development poses the greatest risk to gopher tortoises, fragmenting large blocks of their habitat and leaving them with less room to live and with land that is less suitable for finding food and avoiding predators. In many cases, the land cannot be enhanced with prescribed fire, tortoises cannot disperse, and the chance increases that they will be harmed or killed in interactions with humans, pets, and vehicles. Fire suppression and dense tree coverage degrades gopher tortoise habitat by reducing light to the ground and thus growth of ground cover. With proper permits (contact your local FWC office), gopher tortoises living on proposed development sites may be relocated to a new area; but relocations are often unsuccessful because the tortoises rarely stay at their new sites, may spread disease, and may disrupt resident tortoise populations. Several management plans by the FWC and USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service are being implemented to restore and maintain gopher tortoise habitat and populations.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

- Grow native gopher-tortoise-friendly plants on your property such as wiregrass, broadleaf grasses, wild peas, blueberries, and prickly pear.
- State law protects gopher tortoises and their burrows. Only permitted individuals are allowed to relocate them. Please do not harass, pursue, or molest them.
- Avoid mowing, driving over, or disturbing the area around a burrow, and never block a burrow opening.
- Report gopher tortoise locations using this app, <http://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/managed/gopher-tortoise/app/>.



Examples of other wildlife (called commensals) that uses gopher tortoise burrows.



## More information and factsheets at [edis.ifas.ufl.edu](http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu)

- Gopher Tortoise Council
- Pine Ecosystem Handbook for Gopher Tortoises
- FWC