



Cliff Leonard

Gopher tortoise fast facts

- Gopher tortoise burrows average seven feet deep and 15 feet long but may be more than 40 feet long.
- A tortoise may have multiple burrows within the area it spends most of its time.
- Burrow openings are half-moon shaped with the curve at the top, and its size is a fair representation of the size of the tortoise. Burrows with round openings have generally been taken over by an armadillo.
- Adult tortoises are generally 9-11 inches long and weigh 7-9 pounds.
- Females begin to reproduce when they are 9-21 years old (age depends on local conditions); males begin slightly younger.
- They breed March-October but generally dig nests in May and June. One clutch is laid per year with an average of six eggs. Many eggs never hatch because they are eaten by mammals, birds and snakes.
- The biggest threat to the gopher tortoises' long-term survival is loss of habitat.

Wildlife Alert Reward Program

It is against the law to kill, harass or destroy gopher tortoises, their burrows or eggs. If you suspect illegal activity, you can report it anonymously to FWC's Wildlife Alert Hotline at 888-404-3922, 24 hours a day or online at MyFWC.com/law/Alert. You could be eligible for a reward if your information leads to an arrest.



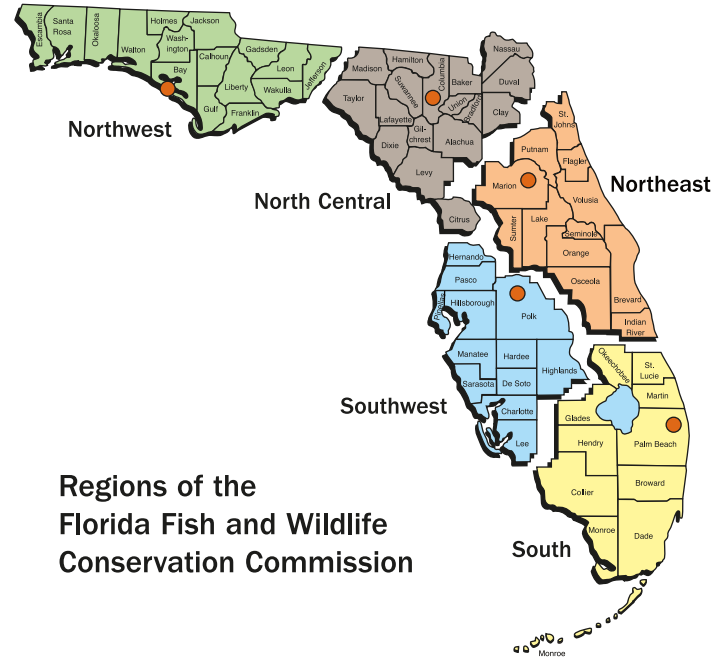
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Before you bulldoze

Before you clear land, learn the law. Visit MyFWC.com/GopherTortoise or call the gopher tortoise conservation biologist in your region. Request a permitting fact sheet and remember gopher tortoises must be relocated before any land clearing or development takes place. Property owners must obtain permits from the FWC before tortoises can be moved. Depending on the type of permit, you may be permitted to move the tortoises yourself or you may need to contact an authorized agent.

Tips for horse owners

Gopher tortoises often dig their burrows in pastures, which can be a challenge to horse farm owners who are concerned their horses may step into the burrows and be injured. For tips on how to avoid potential horse-tortoise conflicts, visit MyFWC.com/GopherTortoise or call the gopher tortoise conservation biologist in your region.



Northwest Region
 3911 Highway 2321
 Panama City, FL 32409-1658
 850-265-3676

North Central Region
 3377 East U.S. Highway 90
 Lake City, FL 32055-8795
 386-758-0525

Northeast Region
 1239 S.W. 10th Street
 Ocala, FL 34471-0323
 352-732-1225

Southwest Region
 3900 Drane Field Road
 Lakeland, FL 33811-1299
 863-648-3200

South Region
 8535 Northlake Boulevard
 West Palm Beach, FL 33412
 561-625-5122

For more on any information in this brochure, or for Gopher Tortoise Management Plan or permitting information, please call the gopher tortoise conservation biologist in your region listed above, or call 850-488-3831, or visit MyFWC.com/GopherTortoise.

A guide to living with gopher tortoises



David Moynahan



Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
MyFWC.com



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The gopher tortoise in Florida

Where they live: high and dry

The gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) is a medium size land turtle with large, stumpy hind legs and flattened, shovel-like front legs it uses to dig burrows in sandy soil. These burrows provide a home and refuge for the tortoise and more than 350 species of wild animals and insects that share the same habitat.

Gopher tortoises occur in parts of all 67 counties in Florida, but prefer high, dry, sandy places such as longleaf pine and oak sandhills. They also live in scrub, dry hammocks, pine flatwoods, dry prairies, coastal grasslands and dunes, mixed hardwood-pine communities and a variety of disturbed habitats, such as pasture lands.

What they eat

Gopher tortoises graze naturally on a wide variety of plant types, including broadleaf grasses, wiregrass, prickly pear cactus, wild grape, blackberry, blueberry, beautyberry and many more. They generally feed within about 160 feet of their burrows, but have been known to travel more than twice that distance to meet their foraging and nutritional needs.

A keystone species

Wildlife experts call the gopher tortoise a “keystone species” because it is the backbone of the plant and wildlife community in which it lives. Without the tortoise, the populations of more than 350 wildlife species that seek refuge or live in the burrows would be greatly reduced, if not eliminated. The species that depend upon tortoise burrows are called commensals and include the indigo snake, pine snake, gopher frog, opossum, burrowing owl, Florida mouse, gopher cricket and scarab beetle.

Protecting and managing

Gopher tortoises have lived for millions of years, but biologists who study these ancient reptiles are concerned we may lose them entirely unless we do more to protect and conserve them and their rapidly disappearing habitat.

In 2007, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) listed the gopher tortoise as a threatened species and created a plan to manage and protect these unique reptiles. The plan is a blueprint of conservation objectives and actions which includes guidelines for landowners whose property contains gopher tortoises, habitat acquisition plans and permitting guidelines all designed to ensure the tortoises’ habitat needs are met now and in the future.

Legal protection

It is against the law to damage, destroy, harass or kill gopher tortoises, their burrows or their eggs. Gopher tortoises must be moved out of harm’s way before any land clearing or development takes place. Permits are required from the FWC before handling or moving tortoises.



Robert La Follette



Living in your yard

If a gopher tortoise is living in your yard, embrace the opportunity to learn about a threatened species and help the conservation efforts. Here are a few tips:

- Leave the tortoise alone and keep dogs and small children away from it and its burrow.
- Use tortoise-friendly plants to landscape your yard. In addition to providing excellent food for the tortoise, the plants will require very little watering once established. For a list of suitable plants visit MyFWC.com/GopherTortoise.
- Allow the tortoise to come and go freely from your yard. Fencing it in or restricting its movements in any way is against the law.
- It is acceptable to trim tall grass around the burrow if necessary but leave the burrow and mound alone.
- If possible, avoid mowing, digging, driving over or otherwise disturbing the area right around the burrow, which includes the entrance apron and 25 feet beyond the burrow opening.
- Never block the entrance to the burrow, it could harm the tortoise or prevent its exit.
- A burrow should not compromise the integrity of a foundation or mound septic system, but the gopher tortoise conservation biologist in your region can offer you options.

Crossing the road

- Do not take the tortoise with you.
- If it is in the roadway you can move it across the road in the direction in which it was headed. **Do not put your life in danger to move the tortoise.**
- Do not put the tortoise in the water. Gopher tortoises are terrestrial turtles which means they live on land.

Living in your neighborhood

Gopher tortoises and their burrows are often found on undeveloped lots in neighborhoods that were built in gopher tortoise habitat. The last remaining tortoises in a community sometimes take refuge on these habitat islands scattered among home sites. If your neighborhood has some of these reptilian residents, keep the following in mind:

- Before a lot can be developed, any gopher tortoises present must, by law, be moved out of harm’s way before land clearing begins. Property owners must obtain permits from the FWC before moving gopher tortoises.
- If a lot is about to be developed, you can search the online gopher tortoise permitting database at MyFWC.com/GopherTortoise to see if a permit to move the tortoise(s) has been issued. You can also call the gopher tortoise conservation biologist in your region.
- If there is no land clearing or construction activity on the lot, leave the tortoises alone.
- If you suspect a violation has occurred or is about to occur, call the FWC’s toll free Wildlife Alert Hotline at 888-404-3922 or report it online at MyFWC.com/law/Alert.

Sick or injured

- Sometimes it’s better to just leave a sick or injured gopher tortoise alone and let it return to its burrow to heal.
- You may pick up an injured tortoise to transport it for treatment if necessary.
- Call the nearest FWC regional office to find a wildlife rehabilitator in the area or take it to a veterinarian.
- If you think the injury is the result of a violation and you can provide information, call the FWC’s Wildlife Alert Hotline.

Help their future

- Become tortoise-wise: Learn about gopher tortoises and their habitat needs online at MyFWC.com/GopherTortoise and share the information with family, friends and neighbors.
- Support “green spaces” in and around developments – there is still time to save gopher tortoise habitat before it’s gone.