



Photo credit: Kyle Sweet

Juvenile tortoise: notice the yellow coloring

The Future

Though much of the upland habitat needed for tortoises has been developed on Sanibel, several upland areas containing high densities of tortoises remain as conservation lands. However, these populations cannot be solely relied on to ensure long-term survival of gopher tortoises on Sanibel. Other small populations located in community conservation easements and backyards are needed to ensure their long-term viability.

The gopher tortoise is a fascinating and gentle creature whose importance in our local ecosystem cannot be overstated. There are several places on the island where gopher tortoises may be observed. Along the shared-use paths on Sanibel-Captiva and Casa Ybel Roads as well as City Hall are good locations. Never chase or harass a gopher tortoise. This may distress the animal and can interfere with its foraging activities, especially during Florida's dry season (October-May).

Gopher tortoises are land animals and not particularly good swimmers; please don't put them into a body of water where they could drown. If helping one safely across the road, it's important to place them on the side of the road that they were heading toward. Tortoises are very determined animals and will simply try to cross the road again once you've left if put back on the side they started from.

If you find an injured gopher tortoise, call CROW (Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife) at 472-3644.



Photo credit: Joel Caouette

Gopher tortoise burrow among native wildflowers

Gopher Tortoise Friendly Landscapes

1. Do not apply pesticides or herbicides where gophers live, walk, or forage.
2. Plant several species of native grasses and flowers; gopher tortoises need 5-9 broadleaf grasses in their diet.
3. Keep an open sunny, non-irrigated area of small herbaceous wild plants; tortoises can eat 300 species of plants in a year.
4. Keep away domestic animals that can eat gopher tortoise shells, babies, and eggs.
5. Keep shady tree canopy coverage to 15% (or less) of gopher tortoise areas to promote the sun loving plants that they prefer.

To learn more about landscaping for gopher tortoises, visit the Natural Resource Department's webpage at www.mysanibel.com or scan the QR code to view a list of "tortoise-friendly" plants.



Sanibel's Gopher Tortoises



Photo credit: Kyle Sweet



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Photo credit: Audrey Albrecht

Adult gopher tortoise

Terrific Tunnelers

Imagine that you must protect yourself from the elements, and to do so, you have to dig a tunnel in the ground that is as wide as your body, 15 - 30 feet long, and 6 feet deep at the end. Not only is this activity vital to your protection, but many others depend on your tunneling ability for their own shelter, food and growth. You can't use any machinery, not even a shovel. You do it with your bare hands! Most of us would say, "forget it." But for the gopher tortoise, the tunneling is all in a day's work.

Description

The gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) averages 9-11 inches long but, can attain lengths of 15 inches. They can weigh up to 15 pounds, but typically weigh about 8 to 10 pounds.

Gopher tortoises are found throughout Florida and prefer sandy, well drained upland areas. They eat grasses, plants in the bean family, fruits, and grass-like plants of the sunflower family.

Habitat

The gopher tortoise's large, flattened forelimbs have special ligaments that stiffen, making it easier for these incredible animals to dig large tunnels, some more than 30 feet long. These tunnels, called burrows, provide shelter from extreme heat or cold, maintaining a temperature of 70-80 degrees in the summer, and 60-70 degrees in the winter.

The gopher tortoise is considered a "keystone" species because its burrow and the excavated sand around the entrance are used by many other invertebrate and vertebrate species. The loss of gopher tortoise habitat means the loss of habitat for up to 300 "commensal" (harmonious co-existence) species.



Photo credit: Joel Caouette

Gopher tortoise burrow entrance

On Sanibel, tortoise burrows can be found in almost any upland area. The largest concentrations of tortoises now are on conservation lands. The gopher tortoise's burrow can be recognized by its half-moon shape and the mound of sand or "apron" (often 3-6 feet wide) at the entrance. The burrows of young gopher tortoises or hatchlings are not so large. A year after hatching, gopher tortoises usually have a burrow 3-4 feet deep.

Reproduction

Gopher tortoises may live more than 40 years, but do not reach reproductive maturity until 10 to 20 years of age. Mating occurs from April to June, with females digging their nest cavity in the mouth of the burrow only once per year. The mean nest size is about six eggs. The incubation period varies from approximately 80 to 110 days.



Photo credit: Dana Dettmar

Gopher tortoise hatchling

History

The gopher tortoise was well established in Florida thousands of years before human existence. Human consumption and encroachment, resulting in loss and degradation of habitat, has contributed substantially to their population decline-about 80 percent over the last one hundred years. In addition, the gopher tortoise does not reach reproductive maturity until ten to twenty years of age, their eggs often succumb to predation, and hatchlings are easy prey for many predators. All these factors have contributed to the need for the gopher tortoise to be listed as "Threatened" by the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission. Out of every 100 eggs laid, it is estimated that only 1-3 survive to the adult breeding stage.