

factors have contributed to the need for the gopher tortoise to be on the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission's Protected Species List as a Species of Special Concern. Out of every 100 eggs laid, it is estimated that only 1-3 survive to the adult breeding stage.



Juvenile: notice the yellow coloring

The Future

Though much of the upland habitats needed for tortoises have been developed on Sanibel, a few upland areas containing high densities of tortoise remain as conservation lands. These populations cannot be counted on however to ensure long-term survival of gopher tortoises on Sanibel. Other small populations located in community conservation easements and backyards will be needed to best ensure 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 can be seen. Along the bike paths on Sanibel-Captiva and Casa Ybel Roads as well as at City Hall

are good locations. Never chase or harass a gopher tortoise. This stresses the animal and can interfere with its foraging activities.

Gopher tortoises are land animals. Please don't put them into a body of water where they could drown. If helping one safely across the road, stop your car and wait for it to cross or place it on the side it was heading toward.

For injured tortoises, call 472-3644.
(Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife)



Adult Female

Gopher Friendly Landscapes

1. Do not apply pesticides or herbicides where gophers live, walk or forage.
2. Add species of native grasses... gophers need 5-9 broadleaf grasses in their diet.
3. Keep an open, sunny un-irrigated area of small wildflowers... gophers can eat 300 species of plants in a year.
4. Keep away dogs, cats, and raccoons that can eat gopher shells, babies, and eggs.
5. Shady tree canopy coverage should be no more than 15% of gopher areas to promote sun loving gopher preferred plants.

Call the Native Plant Nursery at 472.1932 for plants.

Gopher Tortoises



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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, bean family plants, 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 tortoise's burrow and the excavated sand around the entrance are used by many other invertebrate and vertebrate species to varying degrees. The loss of gopher tortoise habitat means the loss of habitat for up to 300 "commensal" (harmonious co-existence) species.



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 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.



Hatchlings

Reproduction

Gopher tortoises may live more than 40 years, but do not reach reproductive maturity until 10 to 20 years of age. Mating occurs 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.

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