

Get The Facts About Gopher Tortoises:

Wildlife Rehabilitation



Requirements of the rehabilitator

Caregivers for sick, injured, orphaned or otherwise impaired gopher tortoises must be licensed as wildlife rehabilitators and abide by the requirements of rule 68A-9.006, Florida Administrative Code. Proper record keeping is required. Rehabilitators should conduct daily documentation of health and behavior, especially sudden changes such as extreme lethargy. It is against the law to subject wildlife to public display while they receive medical treatment. If a rehabilitator considers a gopher tortoise unfit to be re-released into the wild, then an independent evaluation by another rehabilitator or veterinarian is required.

Intake procedures

- Perform a physical examination to determine overall condition and extent of injury or illness.
- Separate tortoises from other animals and wear gloves to avoid spreading disease.
- Evaluate the gopher tortoise for symptoms of Upper Respiratory Tract Disease (URTD): nasal discharge, conjunctivitis, lethargy, emaciation and weakness.

- Provide a terrarium with soft fill (sand or crushed walnut shells), a heat lamp on one side and a shaded hide box on the other side.
- Maintain an ambient temperature of 72-85°F.
- Supply a shallow dish of water and a varied diet consisting of dry tortoise kibble, dark leafy greens, legumes, grasses and fruits.

Upper respiratory tract disease

URTD is a chronic disease implicated in gopher tortoise die-offs across Florida. Clinical signs come and go, so tortoises with the disease may seem healthy and then suddenly appear ill. If a gopher tortoise exhibits clinical signs of URTD, contact FWC immediately. If the gopher tortoise was authorized by a FWC permit to be relocated, you must inform the authorized gopher tortoise agent of all changes in health status, and when the tortoise is recovered and ready to be released.

Additional recommendations

If the tortoise is transferred from a relocation site, maintain communications with the authorized gopher tortoise agent who delivered the gopher tortoise into your care and notify FWC. Both parties should know the projected recovery time and should be updated periodically on the health of the animal. Rehabilitators should contact FWC and the authorized gopher tortoise agent when the animal declines, dies or recovers, and for health evaluation prior to re-release. Only an authorized gopher tortoise agent may release gopher tortoises to FWC-authorized locations.

Further guidelines for gopher tortoise care are available upon request. For more information, contact the gopher tortoise permit coordinator at (850) 921-1031 or visit MyFWC.com/GopherTortoise.



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