Gopher tortoise

*Gopherus polyphemus*

(Photo by FWC)

**Taxonomic Classification**

**Kingdom:** Animalia  
**Phylum:** Chordata  
**Class:** Chelonia  
**Order:** Testudines  
**Family:** Testudinidae  
**Genus/Species:** *Gopherus polyphemus*  
**Common Name:** Gopher tortoise

**Listing Status**

**Federal Status:** Candidate  
**FL Status:** State-designated Threatened  
**FNAI Ranks:** G3/S3 (Rare)  
**IUCN Status:** VU (Vulnerable)

**Physical Description**

The gopher tortoise is a moderate-sized, terrestrial turtle that averages 9-11 inches (23-28 centimeters) long. This species of tortoise has a brown, gray, or tan upper shell (carapace), a yellow lower shell (plastron), and brown to dark gray skin (Florida Natural Areas Inventory 2001). Gopher tortoises have stumpy, elephant-like hind feet and flattened, shovel-like forelimbs that are used for digging burrows.
Life History

Gopher tortoises dig deep burrows that average 15 feet long (4.6 meters) and 6.5 feet (two meters) deep. These burrows provide protection from extreme temperatures, moisture loss, predators, and serve as refuges for 350-400 other species. Because so many other animals depend on the burrows (commensals), gopher tortoises are referred to as a keystone species.

Gopher tortoises generally forage within 160 feet (48.8 meters) of their burrows but have been known to travel greater distances to meet their nutritional needs. Gopher tortoises feed on a wide variety of plants including broadleaf grasses, wiregrass, grass-like asters, legumes, blackberries, and the prickly pear cactus.

Gopher tortoises are slow to reach sexual maturity, have low reproductive potential, but they have a long life span – 60 years or longer. Females reach sexual maturity between 10-20 years of age. The breeding season is generally between March and October. Females lay five to nine eggs between May and June. Nests are excavated in areas of abundant sunlight, especially in the sand mound that is located in front of a burrow. Egg incubation lasts 80 to 90 days in Florida. Hatchlings are capable of digging their own burrow, but may use other tortoises’ burrows instead (Gopher Tortoise Council 2000).

Habitat & Distribution

Gopher tortoises are found in the southeastern Coastal Plain, from southern South Carolina, southwest to extreme southeastern Louisiana (Florida Natural Areas Inventory 2001). In Florida, tortoises occur in parts of all 67 counties, but prefer high, dry sandy habitats such as longleaf pine-xeric oak sandhills. They also may be found in scrub, dry hammocks, pine flatwoods, dry prairies, coastal grasslands and dunes, mixed hardwood-pine communities, and a variety of disturbed habitats, such as pastures.

Threats

The primary threat to the gopher tortoise is habitat loss. Habitat alteration, such as urbanization, generally occurs in the same high, dry habitats that the tortoise prefers. Lack of appropriate land management (especially controlled burning) has also contributed to population declines in areas where natural habitat remains. Other threats include road mortality from vehicles and illegal human predation.
**Conservation & Management**

The gopher tortoise is protected as a State-designated Threatened species by Florida’s Endangered and Threatened Species Rule. Gopher tortoises must be relocated before any land clearing or development takes place, and property owners must obtain permits from FWC before they can move them. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service lists the gopher tortoise as a Candidate species for protection under the Federal Endangered Species Act.

The gopher tortoise has been regulated in Florida since 1972 and has been fully protected since 1988. Despite the afforded protection, many gopher tortoise populations in Florida continue to decline. The species’ Threatened status and the Gopher Tortoise Management Plan were approved in November 2007. The objectives of the management plan are to:

- Optimize gopher tortoise carrying capacity by appropriate habitat management on protected lands.
- Increase protected gopher tortoise habitat.
- Restock gopher tortoises to protected, managed, suitable habitats where they no longer occur or where densities are low.
- Decrease gopher tortoise mortality on lands proposed for development.

**Other Informative Links**

Defenders of Wildlife  
Florida Natural Areas Inventory  
FWC Gopher Tortoise Page  
FWC Petitions and Listing Actions  
Gopher Tortoise Council  
South Carolina Department of Natural Resources

**References**

Florida Natural Areas Inventory. 2001. Field guide to the rare animals of Florida.  
http://www.fnai.org/FieldGuide/pdf/Gopherus_polyphemus.PDF