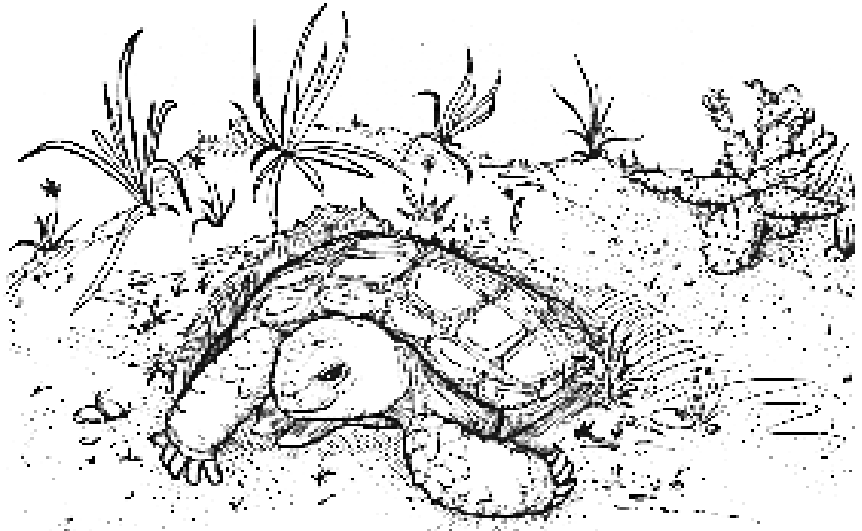


GOPHER TORTOISE FACT SHEET

The gopher tortoise (Gopherus polyphemus) is a member of the class reptilia. Its carapace (top of shell) is grayish-brown and unmarked in adults, while its plastron (bottom of shell), legs, head and neck are golden-yellow.



HABITAT

Gopher tortoises dig burrows — typically ranging in size from 20 to 30 feet long and from six to eight feet deep — with their shovel-like front legs. Biologists have found some burrows as big as 40 feet long and 10 feet deep! The burrows are found in dry places such as sandhills, flatwoods, prairies and coastal dunes or in human-made environments such as pastures, grassy roadsides and old fields. The gopher tortoise is a keystone species, meaning its extinction would result in measurable changes to the ecosystem in which it occurs. Specifically, other animals, such as gopher frogs, several species of snakes and several small mammals, depend on tortoise burrows. For the gopher tortoise to thrive, the animal generally needs three things: well-drained sandy soil (for digging burrows), plenty of low plant growth (for food) and open, sunny areas (for nesting and basking).

RANGE

The gopher tortoise is found along the dry sand ridges of the southeastern Coastal Plain. In Florida, tortoises are found in the panhandle and along the southeastern coast. Tortoises are also found in the southern parts of South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi.

BREEDING

Gopher tortoises usually mate during April and May. Shortly after mating, the female lays between three and 15 eggs, either in a sandy mound in front of her burrow or a nearby sunny place. The eggs mature and hatch from 70 to 100 days later.

The hatchlings spend much of their time in their mother's burrow until they're old enough to dig their own. They don't reach maturity until they are between 10 and 15 years old, when their shells are about 9 inches long.

FEEDING

Gopher tortoises usually eat low-growing plants found in bright sunshine, primarily grasses such as wiregrass. Some tortoises have been known to eat gopher apples, blackberries and other fruits. Gopher tortoises will also scavenge and are opportunistic feeders, occasionally feeding on dead animals or excrement.

SURVIVAL

Gopher tortoises are regarded as endangered in South Carolina and Mississippi, and they are protected in Georgia. They are listed as a federally threatened species in southwestern Alabama and Louisiana. Florida and Georgia list the gopher tortoise as a protected non-game species, and you must have a scientific collecting permit to keep one. Alabama lists the gopher tortoise as a game animal, but it is illegal for people to hunt, capture or kill one.

THREATS

There are several dangers that threaten the survival of the gopher tortoise species. The main reasons for its decline are habitat destruction because of urbanization, mining for phosphate, limestone and sand and careless use of herbicides and pesticides. Other dangers include:

• Forestry practices

Many forestry activities leave behind closely spaced areas of slash or replace the trees they have cut down with loblolly pine. The branches and leaves of these trees are very thick and reduce the amount of sunlight that reaches the ground, thereby limiting the growth of grasses that tortoises eat for food. This also makes it hard for female tortoises to find a spot sunny enough to lay her eggs.

• Tortoises as food

During the Great Depression, many people ate tortoises when they couldn't afford any other kind of meat. Some people still consider gopher tortoises a delicacy, and mistakenly believe that eating tortoise flesh can help with some medical problems. Illegal hunting of tortoises for food has wiped out entire colonies in some places.

• Roads

Many tortoises are killed each year by motor vehicles. In addition,

building new roads sometimes isolates colonies of tortoises, making it hard for them to find food or places to nest.

RESEARCH

There are a number of questions scientists haven't been able to answer yet, including:

- How do gopher tortoises select mates?
- How many burrows are used each year by males and females?
- How long do tortoises live?
- Can gopher tortoises be moved from one colony to another successfully?

Scientists at the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory are trying to find answers to these questions. They have proposed a reintroduction of the gopher tortoise to the southern edge of the Savannah River Site. Researchers believe gopher tortoises once lived on the SRS about 100 years ago, but were driven away by agriculture and other habitat destruction. Now, a suitable habitat exists on site where they could be studied for the next 20 or 30 years. Research from this program and others like it could help give the gopher tortoise a bright future.

DID YOU KNOW?

- ✓ Tortoise burrows also provide homes for other animals, such as indigo snakes, gopher frogs, mice, foxes, skunks, opossums, rabbits, quail, armadillos, burrowing owls, snakes, lizards, frogs, toads and invertebrates.
- ✓ Tortoise eggs are threatened by such predators as armadillos, raccoons, foxes and skunks. Once they hatch, however, tortoises have few enemies besides man, dogs, raccoons and coyotes and can live as long as 40 years or longer, in some cases.
- ✓ Not all forestry practices are bad for tortoises. Thinning and burning done by some foresters open up the canopy of leaves and branches overhead and allow sunlight in and low vegetation to grow.
- ✓ Tortoise racing, now illegal, used to be a popular pastime in Florida. Participants would capture tortoises, race them and then release them into the environment. The only problem was that some of the tortoises weren't released in the same place they were found, and couldn't adapt to another habitat or colony. Now, racers use fake tortoises that are moved either by remote control or by pulleys.