

# Gopher Tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*)



**DESCRIPTION:** Gopher tortoises are land turtles that average 9–11 inches in length and weigh up to 9 pounds. They have stocky, elephant-like hind feet and flattened, shovel-like forelimbs adapted for digging. Their domed, elongated shell is tan or brownish gray. Hatchlings are bright yellow. Adult males have a concave plastron (bottom shell), longer tail and extended shell under their chin that distinguishes them from females. Females are larger in size.

**HABITAT & RANGE:** The gopher tortoise requires open, dry, sandy upland habitat with abundant low growing vegetation, such as pine flatwoods, scrub, oak-sandhills and coastal dunes. The only tortoise east of the Mississippi, it occurs in the southern regions of Alabama, Mississippi and Georgia, much of Florida and limited parts of eastern Louisiana and southwest South Carolina.

**LIFE HISTORY:** Gopher tortoises dig burrows up to ten feet deep and 40 feet long that shelter them from sun, fire and predators. They are considered a keystone species because they share these burrows with over 350 commensals - including insects, amphibians, other reptiles, birds and mammals. Significant species that benefit from using tortoise burrows are the gopher cricket, gopher frog, eastern indigo snake, eastern diamondback rattlesnake, burrowing owl and Florida mouse. Gopher tortoises can live 40-60 years in the wild.

**DIET:** Gopher tortoises are herbivores. They eat grasses, prickly pear cactus, berries, legumes, clover, cat brier, palmetto berries and pine needles. They get water from these plants plus dew and rarely need to drink.

**REPRODUCTION:** Gopher tortoises don't reach maturity until 10 years of age or older. To initiate mating a male will head bob, shell nip and rub pheromones from scent glands on his legs onto the female, who digs a nest at the mouth of her burrow. The breeding season is April–November, but only one clutch of about six eggs is produced annually. Incubation is 80-100 days. The temperature of the nest determines the gender of the hatchlings, before creating a burrow of their own or living temporarily in an adult burrow.

**STATUS:** Gopher tortoises are state listed as Threatened in Georgia, Florida, eastern Alabama and South Carolina and federally listed as Threatened in Mississippi, Louisiana and western Alabama.

**THREATS:** A major threat is loss of habitat due to development and also fire suppression, which allows small trees, shrubs, and brambles to grow making navigation difficult and shading out the vegetation that gopher tortoises eat. Road mortality, disease and predation on nests and hatchlings are also factors.