

Gopher Tortoise Facts



1. Gopher tortoises are a keystone species, meaning that many other species in their native ecosystem depend on them.
2. Gopher tortoises are a protected species throughout their range. They are federally protected west of the Mobile River. Their biggest threat is habitat loss.
3. Threats to gopher tortoises include loss of habitat, gassing burrows for rattlesnakes and human interference (pet trade and roadway strikes).
4. Gopher tortoises primarily live in the longleaf pine ecosystem. However, gopher tortoises are frequently encountered in neighborhoods, along roadways and on many of the state's private and public lands.
5. Gopher tortoises are one of four species of tortoises found in the United States. The other three species are found in the southwest U.S.
6. Female gopher tortoises are slightly larger than males and have a flat lower shell, where males will have a concave lower shell.
7. Permits from appropriate state and federal agencies are required to possess or study gopher tortoises.
8. Gopher tortoise hatchlings are a bright yellow color that eventually fades to tan or brownish gray.
9. Gopher tortoises love to bask in open sunny areas often at the entrance to their burrows.
10. The gopher tortoise belongs to a group of land tortoises that originated in western North America nearly 60 million years ago.
11. Gopher tortoises average between 9 and 15 inches in length.
12. As tortoises are land-dwelling, they cannot swim well and should not be put in the water.
13. Fire suppression is another threat to the gopher tortoise, as regenerative fires are vital to their grassland habitat.
14. Male gopher tortoises will begin an attempt at courtship by bobbing their heads up and down repeatedly.

15. Gopher tortoises burrow to create refuge from weather and predators.
16. Gopher tortoise burrows are typically 15-20 feet long and 6.5 feet deep. The longest recorded burrow is 47 feet long.
17. Female gopher tortoises lay between three and 15 eggs per clutch, and only lay one clutch per year.
18. Gopher tortoises generally do not need to drink water as they get it from the plants they consume.
19. Over 350 other animals may live in gopher tortoise burrows, including the federally threatened Eastern indigo snake.
20. Gopher tortoises have shovel-like front legs for digging and elephant-like hind feet for walking.
21. Female gopher tortoises may return a courtship ritual by digging a nest at the mouth of her burrow.
22. Herbicides and pesticides are harmful to gopher tortoises, as they can consume these while foraging.
23. Gopher tortoises reach sexual maturity between 9 and 20 years.
24. Gopher tortoise eggs are round and about the size of a ping pong ball.
25. Gopher tortoises typically weigh between 7-10 lbs.
26. In the wild, gopher tortoises can live to between 40 and 60 years old.
27. The entrance of a gopher tortoise burrow is called an apron and can be identified by a mound of loose sand.
28. The Gopher Tortoise Council was formed in 1978 for the conservation of gopher tortoises across the Southeastern United States. <http://www.gophertortoisecouncil.org>
29. Like some other reptiles, the temperature of gopher tortoise nests during egg incubation determines the sex of the hatchlings.
30. Landowners within gopher tortoise habitat range should be aware of potential tortoises and avoid burrow disturbance. Seek assistance from state wildlife personnel if conflicts arise.
31. Gopher tortoises are herbivores! They like forbs (flowering weeds and plants), grasses, fruits and prickly pear cactus.
32. A gopher tortoise burrow keeps stable humidity and temperatures annually.
33. It is illegal to keep gopher tortoises as pets.
34. Hatchling gopher tortoises will temporarily live in adult burrows before creating their own burrows.
35. Adult tortoises have few enemies besides humans.
36. Young tortoises are vulnerable to predation by raccoons, armadillos and hawks.
37. The gopher tortoise is the only species of North American tortoise that naturally occurs east of the Mississippi River.
38. The Alabama Conservation Advisory Board has banned "gassing" of wildlife burrows, dens or retreats. This practice was often used on gopher tortoise burrows to flush out Eastern diamondback rattlesnakes by snake hunters.
39. Citizens may move a gopher tortoise crossing a road to the shoulder in the direction it was moving if deemed safe to do so. Other contact between humans and gopher tortoises is prohibited by law.