

Gopher Tortoise  
*Gopherus polyphemus*



*The best gopher tortoise populations in Alabama are found in longleaf pine-scrub oak-wiregrass sand hills that are frequently burned.*



# Gopher Tortoises *on the Move*

Wehle Forever Wild Tract Becomes New Home for Threatened Species

Story and Photography by Rebecca Leigh White

**As the winter thaw begins and warmer days point toward spring, members of one of Alabama's most interesting species begin to crawl out from their burrows to bask in the bright sunlight.**

This year, the Wehle Forever Wild Tract, located in Bullock County, is a new home for 17 gopher tortoises. The gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) is a part of the land tortoise family, originating in western North America nearly 60 million years ago. Since then, gopher tortoises, or "gophers" as they are better known, migrated to upland habitats in the coastal plain of the United States including south Alabama.

The population of gopher tortoises is decreasing in Alabama and other areas of the nation where they are found. In an effort to protect and increase the population, The Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR) captured and relocated the 17 gopher tortoises to a protected habitat in 2006.

## **Tortoise Relocation**

State biologists and wildlife experts trapped six gopher tortoises on the Three Notch Plantation (a private landowner donor site) in Bullock County for relocation to the Wehle Tract where they are studied and protected. The other 11 gophers came from other areas in the state.

The population of gophers continues to decrease nationwide due to several reasons – habitat destruction, illegal hunting, predators, disease, forest mismanagement, starvation, road mortality and poisoning. In 2005, the State Lands Division secured a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service threatened and endangered species matching grant through the ADCNR Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division to provide funds for relocating gopher tortoises onto the Wehle Forever Wild Tract.

Conservation Commissioner Barnett Lawley is pleased that another of Alabama's imperiled wildlife species is being protected and preserved. "The gopher tortoise is one of the many unique animals in Alabama that need our help to thrive in their natural

habitat," said Lawley. "We appreciate landowner Virginia Swift sharing the strong population of gophers from her plantation to help initiate a new population at the Wehle Tract for conservation and educational purposes." The 1,505 acres of the Wehle Tract and a portion of a wildlife management area are used for public recreation, a nature preserve and is home to the Wehle Land Conservation Center.

"The relocation project was made possible in part through a grant to help reverse the decline of this and other sensitive species," said ADCNR Biologist Eric Soehren. "As protectors of the environment, we all need to be diligent in our efforts to help protect the gophers by ensuring habitat survival." Soehren pointed out that there are ways all of us can help. "If a gopher tortoise is seen in the road, avoid hitting it and then stop, pick it up, and move it off to the side of the road out of eminent danger. Private landowners who discover a gopher habitat on their property can also help protect them by having prescribed burns, eradicating invasive and aggressive species of vegetation such as cogongrass, and handling them as little as possible," Soehren said.

## Gopher Habitat

Gophers live in extensive subterranean burrows among longleaf pine sandhills, shrub, pine flatwoods, dry prairies, and sand dunes. They also live in manmade environments, such as pastures, old fields, and along grassy roadsides. Gophers are unique as they are one of the few tortoises that dig and live in long burrows that can measure up to 40 feet in length and 10 feet in depth. They dig their homes with their shovel-like feet and spend about 75 percent of their lives inside. Additionally, gopher burrows offer refuge to other animals such as mice and rats, gopher frogs, gopher crickets, and snakes including the federally threatened indigo snake. Gophers mainly feed on low-growing plants that require an abundant amount of sunlight.


In Alabama, the gopher tortoise is a protected non-game species; populations west of the Tombigbee and Mobile Rivers are federally listed as a Threatened Species. Additionally, the gopher tortoise is on the list of species in Alabama that is protected by state law (Nongame Species Regulation 290-2-.92).

Gophers are found in the following Alabama counties: Choctaw, Washington, Mobile, Baldwin, Barbour, Bullock, Butler, Clarke, Crenshaw, Coffee, Conecuh, Covington, Dale, Escambia, Geneva, Henry, Houston, Monroe, Montgomery, Pike, and Wilcox. Additionally,

small populations occur in Autauga and Macon counties where man introduced them. Alabama is one of only six southern states (Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi and South Carolina) where gopher tortoise populations are currently found.

## More Information

The Forever Wild Program was created to preserve Alabama's natural heritage through land acquisition and maintenance of unique lands and waters of Alabama. Funding for land acquisition is derived primarily from interest from offshore gas leases. This funding will be available through fiscal year 2012-2013. All lands are managed under a multiple use management principal, to ensure that all resources including recreation, hunting, fishing, boating, hiking, aesthetics, soil, water, forests and minerals are protected or enhanced. The State Lands Division writes the management plan that is presented to the board for approval within one year of purchase. To date, the Forever Wild Land Trust has purchased 54 tracts totaling 130,000 acres.

To learn more about gopher tortoises, contact the ADCNR Lands Division at 334-242-3484, or the ADCNR Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division at 334-242-3469. 



The Robert G. Wehle Nature Center near Midway, Alabama, is designed to enhance land stewardship and provide an understanding of man's relationship with the environment. The facility, provided by the ADCNR State Lands Division is open on Saturdays and promotes conservation and environmental education for the public. A state-of-the-art audiovisual theater focuses on the natural wonders of outdoor Alabama. Additionally, a conference area/exhibit room is available for conservation meetings and hands-on nature presentations. Remote from the main building at the edge of a small wetlands, a viewing kiosk provides naturalists with an up-close and personal experience with the inhabitants of Alabama's wetland. Three trails extend away from the Center, taking hikers on short, medium, and long treks through different habitats. The trails are augmented with interpretive stations highlighting the unique characteristics of many local plants and animals and offer visitors fitness opportunities. A large pond provides opportunities for scheduled fishing events.

The Wehle Land Conservation Center is open many Saturdays and is the location for several special events including Alabama Outdoor Heritage Day and Plantfest. The Wehle Land Conservation Center is located approximately five miles Southeast of Midway, Alabama on County Road 47. Take U.S. Hwy. 82 from either Montgomery or Eufaula to Midway and follow the "Nature Center" signs. Visit [www.outdooralabama.com](http://www.outdooralabama.com) for more information.



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