



Cape Coral's Terrific Tunnelers

Imagine that you must protect yourself from the elements, and to do so, you have to dig a tunnel in the ground that is as wide as your body, 15 - 30 feet long, and 6 feet deep at the end. Not only is this activity vital to your protection, but many others depend on your tunneling ability for their own shelter, food and growth. You can't use any machinery, not even a shovel. You do it with your bare hands. Most of us would say, "forget it." But for the gopher tortoise, the tunneling is all in a day's work.

Description

The Gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) averages 9-11 inches long but can attain lengths of 15 inches. They can weigh up to 15 pounds, but typically weigh about 8 to 10 pounds. Gopher tortoises are found throughout Florida and prefer sandy, well drained upland areas. They eat grasses, bean family plants, fruits and grass-like plants of the sunflower family.

Habitat

The gopher tortoise's large, flattened forelimbs have special ligaments that stiffen, making it easier for these incredible animals to dig large tunnels, some more than 30 feet long. These tunnels, called burrows, provide shelter from extreme heat or cold, maintaining a temperature of 70-80 degrees in the summer, and 60-70 degrees in the winter.

The tortoise's burrow and the excavated sand around the entrance are used by many other invertebrate and vertebrate species to varying degrees. The loss of gopher tortoise habitat means the loss of habitat for up to 300 "commensal" (harmonious co-existence) species.



Gopher tortoise burrow entrance

In Cape Coral, there can be scattered enclaves of one to five tortoise burrows on vacant lots, as well as a few areas containing ten to forty burrows. The gopher tortoise's burrow can be recognized by its half-moon shape and the mound of sand often 3-6 feet wide at the entrance. The burrows of young gopher tortoises or hatchlings are not so large. A year after hatching, gopher tortoises usually have a burrow 3-4 feet deep.



Young gopher tortoise approx. 6 inches long

Reproduction

Gopher tortoises can live 40 to 60 years in the wild, but do not reach reproductive maturity until 10 to 20 years of age. Mating occurs during April to June, with females digging their nest cavity in the mouth of the burrow only once per year.

The mean nest size is about six eggs. The incubation period varies from approximately 80 to 110 days.

History

The gopher tortoise was well established in Florida thousands of years before human existence. Human consumption and encroachment, resulting in loss and degradation of habitat has contributed substantially to their population decline-about 80 percent over the last one hundred years. In addition, the gopher tortoise does not reach reproductive maturity until ten to twenty years of age, their eggs often succumb to predation, and many are plagued by a life-threatening respiratory disease.



Juvenile: notice the yellow coloring

The Future

A lack of genetic diversity is also a problem for the remaining gopher tortoises. However, preserving small, viable populations may make a difference. This prevents the spread of disease and prevents the loss of large populations due to catastrophic events. With some areas set aside for preservation, it is hoped that the City of Cape Coral can help sustain the gopher tortoise population.

The gopher tortoise is a fascinating and gentle creature whose importance in our local ecosystem cannot be overstated. There are several places nearby that provide easy access to gopher tortoise viewing. You can visit the Charlotte Harbor Environmental Center on Burnt Store Road just north of Cape Coral or the Sanibel-Captiva Nature Center located on Sanibel Island across from the Ding Darling National Wildlife Sanctuary.

Remember, gopher tortoises are land animals.

Please don't put them into a body of water where they could drown. If helping one safely across the road, place them on the side they were heading toward. Tortoises are very determined animals and will simply try to cross the road again once you've left if put back on the side they started from.



Adult male gopher tortoise

If you find an injured gopher tortoise, you can contact the FWC Wildlife Alert hotline at (888) 404-3922, or call C.R.O.W. (Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife) at 239-472-3644.

Cape Coral's Gopher Tortoises



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