

The gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) is a land turtle. It has legs (not flippers) which it can withdraw along with its head into its shell. These characteristics readily distinguish it from sea turtles. Though preferring high and dry habitat, gopher tortoises in Florida also dig burrows on coastal dunes where they forage nearby for prickly pear cactus, beautyberry, and other native vegetation. They often venture out onto the open beach as well.

Gopher tortoises have a helmet-shaped upper shell (carapace). Females have a flat bottom shell (plastron), and males have a slightly concave bottom shell. Gopher tortoises grow to about a foot in length and can weigh up to 9 pounds. A gopher tortoise digs its burrows with shovel-like front legs. Burrows generally have a single opening, which is half-moon shaped, curved on top and flat on the bottom. A tortoise may maintain multiple burrows, periodically spending time in one and then in another. Average burrows are about 7' deep and 15' long, but some continue for more than 40'. Females are at least 9 years old before they reproduce, and they nest only once a year, mostly in May or June, laying an average of 6 eggs. They lay the eggs usually in the sandy area called the apron at the burrow mouth.

Gopher tortoises spend most of their time in their burrows, protected there from extreme heat and cold, predators and fires. Outside, they generally stay within a 160' radius of their burrows. At least 350 other species of wildlife and insects are known to share the burrows.

Gopher tortoises are found in all 67 counties of Florida, but ongoing habitat loss threatens their survival. Since 2007, they have been listed by the FWC as a Threatened species and afforded protections to better meet their habitat needs. It is against the law to damage, destroy, harass, or kill gopher tortoises, their burrows or their eggs.

## **How to Help**

### ***Gopher tortoise in the road?***

*Carry it across in the direction it was headed... if you can safely do so.*

### ***Injured gopher tortoise?***

*Consult a veterinarian or wildlife rescue/rehab facility. In the Venice, Englewood, Cape Haze area contact: Wildlife Center of Southwest Florida, 925 N Jackson Rd Venice, FL  
941-484-9657 or 941-4967 (after hours emergency)*

### ***Feeding gopher tortoises?***

*DO NOT. Instead, landscape with native plants and grasses that help tortoises meet their nutritional needs.*

### ***Tortoises or burrows present on your buildable property?***

*Gopher tortoises must be moved out of harm's way before any land clearing or development takes place. Permits are required from the FWC before handling or moving tortoises.*

*Visit [MyFWC.com/GopherTortoise](http://MyFWC.com/GopherTortoise) for information on permits and to apply for a permit online. In some cases, hiring a consultant should be considered. For further information, contact the FWC regional gopher tortoise biologist for SW Florida at: 941-421-2068, Ext. 210*

*For more information, visit: [www.gophertortoiseCouncil.org](http://www.gophertortoiseCouncil.org)*