

Information on the Florida Gopher Tortoise





Threats & Legal Protection

- ▶ Florida gopher tortoises are listed in Florida as a Threatened Species. Activities which may affect gopher tortoises are regulated by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC).
- ▶ It is illegal to “take” tortoises, which includes harm, harassment, capture, possession, selling, transporting, or damaging a burrow (including both tortoises and their eggs).
- ▶ Habitat destruction is one of the largest threats to tortoise populations. This destruction can come in the form of development, habitat fragmentation, habitat degradation, and agricultural/silvicultural activities.
- ▶ Gopher tortoises are vulnerable when crossing roadways, or in any areas where they are subject to increased threats such as heavily mowed areas or areas of heavy off-road vehicle use.
- ▶ Activities involving disturbance to gopher tortoise burrows require coordination with the FWC. Single family homes and other small projects may use a relatively simple, on-line permitting process. Larger, more complicated projects may require the assistance of a certified professional gopher tortoise agent.
- ▶ For questions concerning Florida gopher tortoise permitting, contact you local FWC office. For Indian River County, the Northeast Regional point of contact is Rachel King at (561)625-5122.



Life History

- ▶ Gopher tortoises are usually found in well-drained, sandy soils generally associated with grasslands, coastal dunes, dry prairies, scrub, scrubby flatwoods, and mesic flatwoods. They are also found in disturbed sites, like roadsides and power lines.
- ▶ Referred to as a “keystone species” because so many other species depend on them for survival - their burrows can provide refuge for up to 360 “commensal” species, including various snakes, frogs, small mammals, and invertebrates.
- ▶ Gopher tortoises can grow up to 15 inches in length, and use their strong, front feet for excavating burrows for refuge. These burrows provide protection from predators, and also serve to maintain a constant environment throughout the cooler times of the year.
- ▶ Burrows generally average 7 feet in depth and 15 feet in length, however, burrows are known to meander more than 40 feet underground.
- ▶ Gopher tortoises can live up to 80 years in the wild, and more than 100 years in captivity.
- ▶ Gopher tortoises lay their eggs at the entrance, or “apron,” of their burrow, which makes them somewhat vulnerable to predators. Only 3-5% of young tortoises survive.
- ▶ Primarily herbivorous, they forage within an area of approximately 160’ of their burrow, and eat a diet of grasses, fungi, berries, cactus, flowers, and low-growing fruits.



If You Have Tortoises on Your Property

There are several options available if you have tortoise on your property...

- ▶ Avoid development in the area of the tortoises
- ▶ Avoid all impacts to tortoise burrows within 25' radius of the burrow entrance
- ▶ Preserve additional habitat on site and relocate tortoise(s) to this area. A permit is required for this option.
- ▶ Relocate tortoises to an off site area. A permit is required to complete this relocation.
- ▶ An Authorized Gopher Tortoise Agent permitted by the FWC must assist with all relocation activities under all permits, except on site relocation conducted under the "10 or Fewer Burrows" permit.



Living With Gopher Tortoises

Here are a few tips for living with gopher tortoises (from the FWC website)....

- ▶ Leave the tortoise alone and keep dogs & small children away from burrows
- ▶ Use tortoise-friendly plants to landscape your yard (refer to information on tortoise friendly plants at MyFWC.com/GopherTortoise)
- ▶ Never fence a tortoise in, and minimize fencing that restricts their movement into areas where they forage
- ▶ Do not feed gopher tortoises
- ▶ Trim tall grass around burrows but try to avoid the mound
- ▶ Avoid mowing, driving or digging within 25' of a burrow
- ▶ Never block the entrance to a burrow

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Other useful tips (from the FWC website)....

- ▶ Do not pick up a tortoise from the road and take it with you; if it is in the road you can move it across the road in the direction it was headed. **Do not put your safety at risk!**
- ▶ Never put a tortoise in water. These are terrestrial species and should never be put into ditches, canals, creeks, ponds, rivers, etc.
- ▶ If you see a sick or injured tortoise, call the nearest FWC regional office. For Indian River County, please call Rachel King at (561)625-5122.
- ▶ Become a tortoise volunteer! The FWC is always in search of community help – contact the regional biologist about:
 - Waif tortoise transportation: volunteers needed to transport waif, rehabilitated, sick or injured tortoises
 - Incidental Take Permit Assistance: volunteers are needed to assist in tortoise surveys & help with trapping and relocation
 - Silt fence installation: FWC needs volunteers to help install silt fencing in relocation sites
 - Mortality data collection: getting training on how to report dead tortoises so that this information can be used by the FWC staff