

Gopher Tortoise

The gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) is an expert excavator. Its scaly, stumpy legs and sharp claws are the perfect tools for digging its underground home called a burrow.

Tortoises often have multiple burrows that average 15 feet in length and sometimes go as deep as six feet. Tunnels lead to chambers where the air temperature and humidity stay relatively constant, providing a safe refuge from weather events or fire.

Gopher tortoises can only dig their burrows in dry sandy soils with good drainage. These areas are naturally prone to periodic wildfire. Without fire, some of the tortoise's favorite food plants, such as native grasses, prickly pear cactus, and saw palmetto, can become shaded out as larger trees grow overhead.



A "Keystone" Species

The gopher tortoise is considered a "keystone" species because its burrows provide benefits to nearly 300 other species. Some animals that use the burrow sporadically include rabbits, owls and fox, while others, such as moths and beetles, live their entire lives within the burrow.

Gopher tortoises usually live in coastal scrub and pine flatwoods habitats. Rookery Bay Reserve staff monitor their populations on the mainland and on barrier islands. Biologists use sophisticated technology to map burrow locations and guide management efforts such as invasive exotic plant removal and prescribed fires.

Threatened

The gopher tortoise is found from Louisiana to South Carolina and is the only tortoise native to Florida. In Florida it is listed as "threatened," making it illegal to kill, damage or harass gopher tortoises, or damage or destroy their eggs or burrows.

Threats to gopher tortoises include habitat loss and fragmentation, poaching, disease, lack of fire, and collisions with cars. ***The tortoises in this enclosure were roadside rescues that were not able to be returned to the wild.***