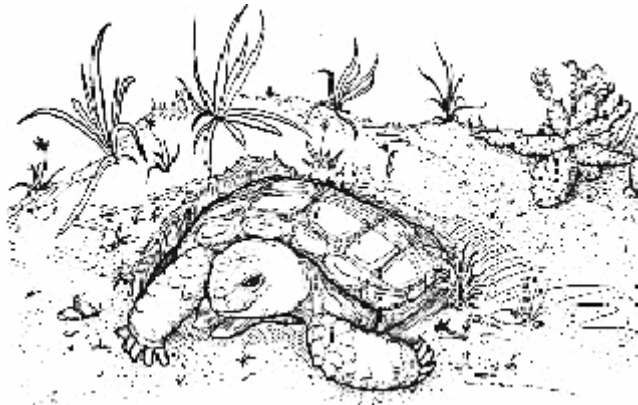


Gopher Tortoise

Scientific Name: *Gopherus polyphemus*



Did You Know?

- They are extremely long-lived animals; estimates for tortoises range from 40 - 80 years.
- Gopher tortoises dig burrows, typically ranging in size from 20 to 30 feet long and from 6 to 8 feet deep, with their shovel-like front legs. Biologists have found some burrows as big as 40 feet long and 10 feet deep!
- Male tortoises can be distinguished from female tortoises by their concave plastron (bottom shell).
- Gopher tortoises feed on herbaceous plants. They tend to avoid the heat of the day, foraging in the morning and late afternoon.
- Gopher tortoises are regarded as endangered in South Carolina and Mississippi, and they are protected in Georgia. They are listed as a federally threatened species in southwestern Alabama and Louisiana. Florida and Georgia list the gopher tortoise as a non-game species, and you must have a scientific collecting permit to keep one. Alabama lists the gopher tortoise as a game animal, but it is illegal for people to hunt, capture or kill one.
- During the Great Depression, many people ate tortoises when they couldn't afford any other kind of meat. Some people still consider gopher tortoises a delicacy and mistakenly believe that eating tortoise flesh can help with some medical problems. Illegal hunting of tortoises for food has wiped out entire colonies in some places.
- It takes a long time for gopher tortoises to reproductively mature. When the shell length is about nine inches (225-235 millimeters) and the female tortoise is 10-15 years old, they reach adulthood in the more southern parts of their range. Farther north they may take up to 21 years to reach maturity.

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General Information on Gopher Tortoises

IDENTIFYING CHARACTERISTICS:

Juveniles have bright tan and brown shells while the shells of adults are darker. The front legs are flat and heavily scaled. They reach a shell length of 12".

RANGE:

Their range extends from southeastern Louisiana to southeastern South Carolina and southward through Florida.

HABITAT:

The burrows are found in dry places such as sandhills, flatwoods, prairies and coastal dunes or in human-made environments such as pastures, grassy roadsides and old fields. The gopher tortoise is a keystone species, meaning its extinction would result in measurable changes to the ecosystem in which it occurs. Specifically, other animals, such as gopher frogs, several species of snakes and several small mammals, depend on tortoise burrows. For the gopher tortoise to thrive, the animal generally needs three things: well-drained sandy soil (for digging burrows), plenty of low plant growth (for food) and open, sunny areas (for nesting and basking).

NESTING:

Females lay an average of six eggs but can lay from three to 14 eggs, depending on their body size. They lay one clutch of eggs per year, and it takes about 100 days for the eggs to incubate. Like many other reptiles, gopher tortoises have temperature-dependent sex determination. That means that when the eggs are laid, they are neither male nor female. The sex of the offspring is determined by the temperature of the sand or dirt where the nest is incubating. For gopher tortoises, if the temperature is above 30° C (85° F), the hatchling tortoises will be females. Temperatures below 30° C produce males. Tortoises are 3 - 5 cm (1.5 - 2 in.) long at hatching and grow very slowly, less than 2.5 cm (1 in.) per year. They have soft shells that leave them extremely vulnerable to predation by raccoons.

FEEDING HABITS:

Gopher tortoises are primarily herbivorous, although they will eat bones from dead animals, presumably to get calcium. Their primary food sources are low-growing grasses and herbs. Examples of their favorite foods are gopher apple and saw palmetto berries. They will eat the pads, fruits, and flowers of prickly pear cactus.