



The TORTOISE BURROW

Newsletter of the
Gopher Tortoise Council

www.gophertortoisecouncil.org

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ALABAMA FLORIDA GEORGIA LOUISIANA MISSISSIPPI SOUTH CAROLINA



Walter Auffenberg (1928-2004)



Walt Auffenberg passed away on 17 January 2004 at the age of 75 after a lingering illness. He was an amazingly talented guy...herpetologist, paleontologist, teacher, family man, pianist, guitar player, motorcyclist, and roller skater. He was also a fabulous artist, producing virtually all of the scientific illustrations used in his publications.

Walt published more than 130 scientific papers and books on fossil amphibians and reptiles, the musculature of snakes, recent and fossil tortoises, and the systematics, evolution and ecology of reptiles, including his famous trilogy on varanid lizards. He inspired the formation of the Gopher Tortoise Council in 1978, which he modeled after the Desert Tortoise Council. Walt felt it imperative to bring attention to the plight of *Gopherus polyphemus*, which he watched decline during his decades in Florida and the Southeast.

Walt Auffenberg was born in Detroit, Michigan, on 6 February 1928, the only child of Walter and Ida Auffenberg. After finishing high school, Walt came to Florida to tend two small orange groves and a fernery near Deland, Florida, which his parents had purchased. Walt enlisted in the Medical Corps of the United States Navy near the end of World War II and was stationed in Corpus Christi, Texas. Following his release from the military and a brief stint working for an oil company in Houston, Walt

with his wife, Elinor, and their family moved to Florida where he attended Stetson University on the G.I. Bill. He received his B.S. from Stetson in 1951. Walt and his family moved to the University of Florida in Gainesville following his graduation to attend graduate school. He received his master's degree in 1953. Prior to finishing his Ph.D., Walt took positions as Associate Curator of Vertebrate Paleontology at The Charleston Museum between 1954-1955 and student assistant to Ernest Williams at Harvard University in the Fall 1955. Walt finished his doctoral degree at the University of Florida under the direction of Arnold Grobman in 1956. His dissertation on the fossil snakes of Florida became a benchmark study for all later studies in snake paleontology.

Walt became Chairman of Natural Sciences and Curator of Herpetology at the Florida State Museum (now Florida Museum of Natural History) in 1963. This allowed Walt to continue his research on fossil and living amphibians and reptiles and raise his family in Florida. He stepped away from his chairman responsibilities in 1973 to devote full attention to herpetology until his retirement in 1991. During his 27-year career at the University of Florida, Walt served as the graduate advisor to Dave Auth, John Iverson, Dale Jackson, Peter Meylan, Bob Taylor, and Bill Weaver, guiding them through their doctoral programs.

Tortoises were particularly fascinating to Walt. This interest led to a series of innovative papers on fossil species in the 1960s, culminating in his "Checklist of Fossil Land Tortoises (Testudinidae)," a worldwide review, published in a 1974 volume of the Bulletin of the Florida State Museum. Like so many of his works, this paper became a basic reference for future studies in tortoise systematics. Walt also raised many tortoise species in his yard, which allowed him time to study their behavior. His work on the Texas tortoises with Bill Weaver and gopher tortoises in the southeast captures his tremendous zest for field investigations, which later translated into his penultimate works on the ecology and behavior of varanid lizards and West Indian rock iguanas.

Walt Auffenberg was a dynamic teacher, mentor, colleague, and friend to me. He will be missed....

Richard Franz

Interior Secretary Praises Tortoise Refuge

The following article and photo by Bill Finch, Environmental editor for the Mobile Register, was published April 9, 2004. *Courtesy of the Mobile Register 2004 (c). All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.*

U.S. Interior Secretary Gale Norton came face to face with an Alabama gopher tortoise Thursday afternoon.

The first-time meeting between the chief supervisor of the federal endangered species program and one of the South's most unusual threatened species took place on Mobile Area Water and Sewer Service (MAWSS) property 15 miles west of Mobile. Norton arrived in Alabama on Wednesday, as part of a swing through the Southeast to tour U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service refuges. The Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Park Service are two of several agencies overseen by the Department of the Interior. Earlier this week, Norton visited the Sandhill Crane National Wildlife Refuge near Moss Point, Mississippi.

Thursday's tour included a boat trip around Big Creek Lake, the city's drinking water reservoir and the adjacent gopher tortoise conservation bank, a refuge for the threatened turtle that was established jointly by MAWSS, Fish and Wildlife and the Environmental Defense Fund.

Cooperative conservation:

Norton promoted her concept of "cooperative conservation" and noted that the gopher tortoise refuge was a prime example of how conservation should work. It's the kind of project, she said, that builds on existing resources and allows "people with differing views to sit down and try to move forward."

While riding out to view a bald eagle's nest -- and two young eagles -- on the edge of Big Creek Lake, Norton talked approvingly of how the refuge and the cooperative agreement with Fish and Wildlife had supported numerous community needs at once. Managers of the area say that the water board land not only protects rare forest types, eagles, gopher tortoises and other creatures, but also protects the quality of Mobile drinking water.

Later in the day, Norton was allowed to hold one of the tortoises before it was released to the wild. Fish and Wildlife officials had trapped the tortoise in order to change its electronic monitor.

Alabama Gov. Bob Riley joined Norton by the lake later in the day, holding a joint press conference to tout Alabama's efforts to encourage more hunting and fishing in the state.



Interior Secretary Gale Norton holds a gopher tortoise

The core of the MAWSS gopher tortoise refuge is a 222-acre conservation bank, where tortoises threatened by development are relocated. Landowners who request that the tortoises be removed from their property are required to pay a fee to maintain the tortoises at the conservation bank.

An additional 1,163 acres adjacent to the bank has been brought under conservation management -- a result of a cooperative agreement between the Mobile water service and Fish and Wildlife.

For 30 years, MAWSS has agreed to restore and manage the larger area as a longleaf pine meadow, aided by a grant from Fish and Wildlife that provides the water service about \$100,000 over the next three years.

Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Barbara Allen said that even in its first year of operation, the refuge concept appears to be working better than many had expected it would.

Scientists said that the population of 10 to 15 tortoises originally on the refuge land was too small to remain "viable" -- that is, the tortoises would have eventually died out because there weren't enough to reproduce healthy offspring.

But Allen said the Service has a goal of increasing the tortoise population to more than one hundred individuals, which is why 56 tortoises have already been relocated to the refuge. Allen said the goal is to bring the population up to about one tortoise for every two acres of refuge land. Tortoises brought to the refuge must go through a strict screening process,

Allen said, in part to prevent the spread of disease.

Some scientists predicted that newly relocated tortoises would quickly try to leave the refuge, but Allen said that none of the relocated or original tortoises on the site have moved from the area.

The gopher tortoise once was a common inhabitant of the longleaf pine forests of the Southeast. But scientists say that longleaf forests now cover less than 5 percent of their original acreage, and the animals that depended on those open, meadow-like forests have declined as well.

Healthy longleaf forests:

Most of Alabama's rare, declining or endangered land-dwelling animals -- gopher tortoises, indigo snakes, red-cockaded woodpeckers, fox squirrels, Bachman's sparrow and pocket gophers, to name a few -- depended on healthy longleaf forests.

The decline of gopher tortoises is often described as one of the most critical losses from the longleaf

forest. The burrowing habits of gopher tortoises provided refuges for a wide variety of animals and may have even played an important role in maintaining certain plant communities.

Allen and other scientists note that one of the most critical ingredients in keeping a gopher tortoise happy is fire. Natural fires, which prevailed for thousands of years in the Southeast, kept the woods sunny and open and relatively free of thickets and shrubs. In those open woods, low grasses and fruit-bearing plants develop eye-level to the gopher. But in thick, modern woods which are never burned, the gophers can barely move about, much less find low plants to eat.

MAWSS forester Art Dyas has directed a burning program at the refuge which has kept the floor of the woods open to sunlight, even as it has encouraged the fire-tolerant longleaf pines to reproduce.

Notes from a Co-chair

BOYD BLIHOVDE

We at the Gopher Tortoise Council send our heartfelt sympathy and regards to the Auffenberg family. Dr. Walt Auffenberg was one of the founders of the Gopher Tortoise Council so his passing is like losing a family patriarch. Let's all try to live up to Dr. Auffenberg's philosophy of gopher tortoise conservation in the future.

The future of education in the Southeast is looking brighter thanks to Laura Wewerka and many other GTC members. Laura has helped spearhead the "Gopher Tortoise: A Species in Decline" resource notebook and slide program. In this issue of the you will learn that Laura has completed the first stage of that educational program (which included distribution of all the notebooks and slide programs to agencies and organizations). Also, Laura has initiated a new GTC Environmental Education mini grant program that is announced in the newsletter and is sure to be popular. Thanks Laura, and the Public Information and Education Committee, for all your hard work!

On April 10, 2004 the Gopher Tortoise Council board members had a very productive meeting.

Items that were discussed included:

- Recap of the Fall 2003 business meeting held at

Wekiwa Springs

- Treasure's report

- GTC operations manual

- The ending of the Visiting Scientist from Asian Turtle Research Program

- Newsletter publication issues

- Using PayPal to help GTC more easily accept donations

- An update on the educational slide show that Laura Wewerka has spearheaded

- Requests for assistance from outside groups

- Sub-accounts that the GTC has reserved for associated non-government organizations

- The award committee's nominations

- 2004 GTC Annual Meeting

- Boosting membership in the GTC

From the above list it is easy to see how busy we were in the meeting. We got a lot accomplished and hopefully the items we voted on will soon be implemented. Make your voice be heard over the upcoming months if you have strong feelings on any issue facing the GTC or the gopher tortoise in general. The GTC board is a small group and we would love to hear from more of the members. The directory of board members can be found on page 7.

If you have been a GTC member for very long, you have heard about our ongoing project, creating an educational slide program "The Gopher Tortoise: A Species in Decline" along with a resource notebook that is being distributed to educators gratis throughout the range of the tortoise. I am very excited to report that all of the programs have been shipped out! Thanks to everyone for their patience, it took several months longer to distribute them than expected. It looks as though there will be a few extra slide sets for those who are interested and I was able to convert the most of the resource notebook into PDF's so if you would like a copy or know of someone else who may please contact me. I also have a limited number of 35mm slide sets and plenty of PowerPoint presentations, scripts and resource notebooks on CDs! The best way to contact me is by email at laura.w@mindspring.com, or at 239-461-7469. Also, GTC state representatives have a complete copy of the notebook with both slides and PowerPoint format, so you could contact them about the program as well.

See the announcement below for information on the Environmental Education mini grant program. GTC will be budgeting \$500 a year to award to educators that have a project that focuses on upland conservation. The application is now available on our website.

And now...I have a request for help to all the GTC members!

The Public Information and Education Committee (like most committees that are run by volunteers) is a committee of one! The definite exception has been with our latest big projects, where numerous people pitched in and helped with assorted smaller tasks.

I have greatly enjoyed working on these large projects as well as answering questions, sending out brochures and coordinating our display board. Unfortunately, my time to devote to GTC will be greatly limited for the next few years since I have returned decided to go to grad school. If you are willing to devote some volunteer time, please contact me we can discuss a list of things that different people have requested or suggested. Some of these are pretty involved. Others might just take an afternoon or two.

I would like to encourage you to select a project and become a little more involved in the Council this year. We all know that tortoise and upland conservation is a critical issue and sometimes it is easy to feel that the problem is so big that there is nothing an individual can really do. I know that by getting one of these things done we won't halt the decline of tortoises, but perhaps with a combination, the public will at least become more informed!

The GTC's New Environmental Education Mini-Program

LAURA WEWERKA

We are pleased to announce our new mini-grant program to help support environmental educators throughout the range of the gopher tortoise. To initiate the program, the Council will award \$500 to one or more educational projects. Award(s) will be presented at the 2004 annual GTC meeting.

Preference will be given to projects that:

- Reach diverse and non-traditional audiences
- Focus on the importance of conserving upland ecosystems
- Encourage community involvement
- Have matching funds

For more information and an application form, visit our website, www.gophertortoiseCouncil.org, or call Public Information and Education Chair Laura Wewerka at 239-461-7469.

Deadline for applications: July 31, 2004.

Meeting Summary- "Gopher Tortoise Conservation in Florida: An Informal Roundtable Discussion"

BOYD BLIHOVDE

In response to increasing concern over the plight of the gopher tortoise in Florida, the Gopher Tortoise Council hosted a roundtable meeting on April 10, 2004. This meeting included tortoise conservationists and researchers from throughout Florida and the Southeast including: Paul Moler, Boyd Blihovde, Joan Berish, Laura Wewerka, George Heinrich, Bill Knox, Cyndi Gates, Lori Wendland, Laurie MacDonald, Chris Lechowicz, Laura Greeno, Margaret Gunzberger, Matt Aresco, John Jensen, Ray Ashton, and Tricia Martin.

The meeting agenda included a synopsis of the state's tortoise regulations and the newly formed FWCC issue team (presented by Joan Berish), results from the range-wide tortoise status workshop (presented by Boyd Blihovde for Lora Smith), grassroots feelings toward gopher tortoises and the Gopher Tortoise Conservation Initiative (GTCI--Ray Ashton), and an update on tortoise health research conducted by University of Florida (Lori Wendland). There was good discussion on all issues regarding gopher tortoise conservation. The group came up with several recommendations to promote gopher tortoise conservation in Florida:

1. Organize a stakeholders group.
2. Increase grassroots support.
3. Increase statewide educational efforts to improve understanding of tortoise biology.
4. Develop a gopher tortoise conservation listserv for information exchange.
5. Increase coordination between non-governmental organizations, county and state government, and major conservation organizations.
6. Organize statewide forums to discuss tortoise conservation issues.

There was also discussion regarding the recent petition sent to the US Fish and Wildlife Service to federally list the gopher tortoise in Florida. Whether attendees were in favor of the petition or not, the issue of listing the tortoise was something everyone felt was going to need attention in the future due to the increase in Florida's human population.

YOU CAN SAVE THE GTC PRINTING AND POSTAGE...

...by "subscribing" to our new e-mail newsletter service. Newsletters will be e-mailed to you as Adobe PDF attachments, and you'll get yours before they reach the mailboxes! To begin receiving your electronic copy, notify Membership Secretary Will Knox at wknox@svic.net.

We respect our members' privacy, and all e-mail addresses remain confidential.



J. Larry Landers Student Research Awards

The Gopher Tortoise Council presents the J. Larry Landers Student Research Award each year to the best student research project concerning gopher tortoise ecology or any aspect of upland communities. In 2003, a total of \$1,600 was awarded to two graduate students to partially support their projects.

Students interested in applying for the J. Larry Landers Student Research Award should submit a concise description of their project with a detailed budget and a brief *curriculum vitae* to Bob Herrington, Research Advisory Committee Head, Dept. of Biology, Georgia Southwestern State University, Americus, GA 31709. Deadline for receipt of proposals to be considered for the 2004 award(s) is August 21, 2004.



Georgia's State Reptile for 15 Years

On March 30, 1989, Governor Joe Frank Harris signed legislation designating the gopher tortoise as Georgia's official state reptile.



Thanks to Harold Wahlquist for providing this information.

Join the Gopher Tortoise Council

Student- \$15
Regular- \$25
Contributor- \$40
Corporation/Society- \$50
Sustaining- \$75
Life- \$300 (one time payment)

Dues reflect changes approved by the board at the October 2003 annual meeting

Make checks payable to
the Gopher Tortoise Council and send to:
GOPHER TORTOISE COUNCIL
c/o Florida Museum of Natural History
University of Florida
P. O. Box 117800
Gainesville, FL 32611-7800

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Mark Your Calendar Now for the Fall Annual Meeting

26th Annual Meeting of the Gopher Tortoise Council

October 15-17, 2004

Oceanside Inn and Suites (on the beach!)

Jekyll Island, Georgia

A block of rooms with two double beds has been set aside for our meeting at a rate of \$71 per night (\$75 for ocean view). The block will be released on Sept. 14th so reservations must be made by then. This rate is available for Oct. 14, 15, and 16. This block will likely fill up quickly, so you are encouraged to make your reservations soon at 912-635-2211. Other hotels on the island are unlikely to have better rates, however there are hotels at the US 17 and I-95 jct. and in Brunswick (both less than 20 minutes from the meeting site) that are likely cheaper.

For those who prefer to camp, there is a nice campground (with bathrooms and showers) five minutes away.

Details will be provided in the next newsletter and on the website: www.gophertortoisecouncil.org.



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