48th Annual Gopher Tortoise Council Meeting

November 6-8, 2026

The Lodge at Gulf State Park, 21196 East Beach Blvd, Gulf Shores, AL 36542

Gulfview Ballroom II

Agenda
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Abstracts
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Friday, Nov. 6

8:30-10:00 am	*Registration (Lobby; light snacks available), Sign in Silent Auction Items*
10:00-10:10 am	**Welcome & Meeting Logistics.** Jeff Baker, GTC Co-Chair, Alabama Power
10:10-10:20 am	**Brief introduction to the Gopher Tortoise Council.** Kevin Loope* and Michelina Dziadzio
10:20-11:20 am	**Keynote Presentation: Crawling in the burrows of giants.** Jeffrey Goessling, Eckerd College
11:20-11:40 am	**The First High-quality, Haplotype-resolved *de novo* Genome Assembly of the Gopher Tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*).** Ksenia Macias Calix*§, Jon Moore, Raquel Assis, and Kelsie Bernot
11:40 am-12:00 pm	**Cold Dormancy Induces a Large, Transient, and Dormancy-specific Transcriptomic Response in Blood from Hatchling Gopher Tortoises.** Anet Filipova*§, Jeffrey Goessling, Ericha Shelton-Nix, and Tonia Schwartz
12:00-12:20 pm	**Detection of *Mycobacterium leprae*, the Causative Agent of Hansen's Disease (Leprosy), in the Soil of a Wildlife Burrow in Florida.** Abigail Bierwerth*§, Lillian Maxwell, Sebastian Botero-Cañola, Norman Beatty, Bettina Broeckling, Charlotte Avanzi, and Juan Campos-Krauer
12:20 pm-1:40 pm	**Lunch** (on your own or ordered during registration, Live Oak Room (I, II, III), onsite restaurants)
1:40-1:50 pm	**Announcements**
1:50-2:10 pm	**Cognition and Conservation: Understanding Individual Variance and its Applications.** Kelsey Felder*§, Elisa Frasnelli, Sal Palmieri, Thomas W. Pike, and Anna Wilkinson
2:10-2:30 pm	**Substrate Effects on the Locomotor Performance and Escape Behaviors of Florida Scrub Lizards.** Elissa Colombo*§ and Lance McBrayer
2:30-2:50 pm	**Seasonality of Ophidiomycosis in Snakes: The Case of Eastern Indigos.** Catherine Hanks*§, Houston Chandler, Ellen Haynes, and Scott Carver
2:50-3:05 pm	**Break**
3:05-3:25 pm	**Grant-supported Outreach and Research Enhances Gopher Tortoise Conservation at Gulf State Park in Alabama.** Hillary Bryan*
3:25-3:45 pm	**Amphibian Diversity in the North American Coastal Plain Global Biodiversity Hotspot.** D. Bruce Means*

*Denotes Presenter; § Student Award Presentation

4:30-6:00 pm **Poster Session** (Gulfview Ballroom II)

6:00-9:00 pm **Social and Dinner** at Gulfview Ballroom I & II, The Lodge at Gulf State Park

Saturday, Nov. 7

7:30-9:00 am *Registration, Sign in Silent Auction Items* (Gulfview Ballroom II)

9:00-9:10 am **Announcements**

Special Session – Conservation Easements – The Benefits and Disadvantages of Using Conservation Easements to Achieve Conservation Successes

9:10-9:25 am **Conservation Easements: Strategy, Stewardship, and Long-Term Success.** Kim Sash*, Tall Timbers Research Station and Land Conservancy

9:25-9:40 am **Conservation Easements Provide Large-scale Perpetual Land Protection and Essential Revenue Generation for a Private Preserve in Northwest Florida.** Matthew J. Aresco*, Nokuse Land Conservancy

9:40-9:55 am **An Overview of Conservation Easements: the Good, the Bad, and the Gopher.** Jimmy Stiles*, Wild Taught Environmental Education and Management

9:55-10:10 am **Writing the Tortoises Into the Deal: A Conservation Easement Case Study from South Alabama.** Mark Bailey*, Conservation Southeast, Inc.

10:10-10:25 am **Special Session Panel Q & A**

10:25-10:50 am **Break**

10:50-11:10 am **Old Tortoises, New Threat? Investigation of a Respiratory Disease Outbreak in a Sentinel Population of Gopher Tortoises.** Betsie B. Rothermel*, Rachel B. Fedders, and Rebecca H. Hardman

11:10-11:30 am **Uncovering Health Threats and Conservation Needs for Louisiana's Critically Imperiled Gopher Tortoises (*Gopherus polyphemus*).** M. Graciela Aguilar*, Kailey Landry, John Tuminello, Karlie Simon, Joseph Nehlig, Tyler Thibodeaux, Kathryn Cannon, Kimberly Boykin, Keri Lejeune, and Mark A. Mitchell

11:30-11:50 am **Regional Structure in Pathogen Prevalence May Explain Counterintuitive Geographic Patterns in Post-translocation Survival in the Gopher Tortoise.** Kevin J. Loope*, Derek B. Breakfield, Rebecca A. Cozad, Matthew J. Aresco, Rebecca Hardman, Matthew Allender, and Elizabeth A. Hunter

11:50 am-1:00 pm **Lunch** (on your own or ordered during registration, Live Oak Room (I, II, III)

1:00-1:20 pm **Toward a Site-Specific Framework for Gopher Tortoise Recipient Sites: Soil Suitability, Carrying Capacity, Habitat Restoration, and Adaptive Management.** Jonathan Napier*

*Denotes Presenter; § Student Award Presentation

1:20-1:40 pm	**A First Look into Dispersal and Site Characteristics of a Persistent Translocated Gopher Tortoise Population.** Nicholas M. DiGiovanni*, Charlotte F. Toomey*, Daniel J. Collins*, Derek B. Breakfield, Charli I. Morgan, Matthew J. Aresco, and Kevin J. Loope
1:40-2:00 pm	**Construction and Conservation: ALDOT's Gopher Tortoise Management.** Emily Duke*
2:00-2:20 pm	**Break**
2:20-2:40 pm	**Relative Body Size and Genetic Relatedness Structure Female-Female Social Interactions in Gopher Tortoises.** Rebecca K. McKee*, Betsie B. Rothermel, Tracey D. Tuberville, Amanda L. West, K. Nicole White, Michael L. Yuan, and Kelly R. Zamudio
2:40-3:00 pm	**Similarities and Distinctions of Gopher Tortoise and Nine-banded Armadillo Burrow Commensals in South Mississippi.** Andrew J. Heaton*, Emmett E. Carstens, and Anant Deshwal
3:00-3:20 pm	**The History of Eastern Indigo Snake Monitoring at Avon Park Air Force Range.** Kameron C. Voves*, Lorraine Ketzler, and Kristopher Pitcher
3:30-4:30 pm	**GTC Business Meeting**
4:30-4:50 pm	**Pick up and pay for Silent Auction Items** **Committee Business** (as needed)
5:00-9:00 pm	**Awards Dinner** at Gulfview Ballroom I & II, The Lodge at Gulf State Park

Sunday, Nov. 8

8:00 am **FIELD TRIPS:**

- Gulf State Park Pier Guided Fishing or Graham Creek Nature Preserve Tour

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PROFESSIONAL POSTERS

Habitat Shifts in Florida Cottonmouths (*Agkistrodon conanti*) within a Fire-Managed Longleaf Pine Ecosystem
Ashlynn Canode* and Kim Sash

Snake Community Habitat Patterns in a Longleaf Pine Woodland
Jennifer M. Howze*, Daniel P. Meng, Thien D. Nguyen, Isabella M. Rios, and Lora Smith

Promoting Coexistence: Tortoise Conservation Messaging in Urban Areas
Caitlin Jones*, Michelina Dziadzio, and Alex Kalfin

Diagnosis for a Declining Tortoise: Systematic Bias or Extinction Debt?
Kevin J. Loope*, Elizabeth A. Hunter, and Kevin T. Shoemaker

Wildlife Interactions Caught on Camera in Snake Box Traps
Thien D. Nguyen*, Daniel P. Meng*, Isabella Rios, Jennifer M. Howze, and Lora L. Smith

Gopher Tortoise Research Needs: Updated Priorities for the Call for Research and Outreach Proposals Program
Emma Rogers*, Michelina Dziadzio, and Alex Kalfin

STUDENT POSTERS

Protein-Supported Gene Annotation of the Gopher Tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) Genome
Hollis Hodges*, Gabriella Funderlich*, Edward King*, Ksenia Macias Calix, Raquel Assis, Jon A. Moore, and Kelsie M. Bernot

Monitoring the Behavior of Gopher Tortoises (*Gopherus polyphemus*) in Mesic Flatwoods Using Tri-axial Accelerometers
Bianca Marcelletti*, James A. Martin, MJ Hankins, Lora L. Smith, Amanda Cramer, and John C. Maerz

Exploring the Potential Use of Trail Cameras in Scoring Body Condition in Gopher Tortoise
Sal Palmieri*, Kelsey Felder, Thomas W. Pike, and Anna Wilkinson

A Decadal Reassessment of Gopher Tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) Population Dynamics and a Contemporary Evaluation of Pocket Gopher (*Geomys pinetis*) Occurrence in the Red Hills Region
Pixie E. Parker*, Kimberly J. Sash, and James A. Martin

Behavior Trials of Headstarted Gopher Frogs (*Rana capito*): Refugia Choice & Boldness
Gabriel E. Weikert*, Kiersten Nelson, and Stacey L. Lance

Evaluating Gopher Tortoise Use of CRP Longleaf Pine
Dana E. Wells*, Lora L. Smith, L. Mike Conner, and Steven B. Castleberry

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