

The Tortoise Burrow

Newsletter of The Gopher Tortoise Council



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Notes From a Co-Chair

M. Gunzburger

Spring has certainly arrived here in north Florida, and with that comes the beginning of "tortoise season" for those who work with and study tortoises. I am lucky enough to live on Nokuse Plantation, a nature preserve managed by my husband Matt Aresco, and thanks to a strong relocation program we now have over 1200 tortoises restocked onto the property. We are literally surrounded by tortoises, with several burrows visible from our back porch! Last weekend we received the first delivery of tortoises for this year, 50 individuals from the Jacksonville area. It's a wonderful feeling to see these tortoises get a second chance at life, and to see them contribute to the overall restoration of the longleaf pine ecosystem on the property.

As many of you already know, Matt and I welcomed our new baby boy, Anthony, into the world on February 25. Watching him grow and change over just the past 2 months has been amazing, and we know it's just the beginning. The experience has really made me think a lot more about the future, and I wonder what the world will be like when little Anthony is grown. I hope the good work we are doing for gopher tortoises now means that there's still healthy tortoise populations for him to enjoy as part of his natural heritage.

GTC Annual Meeting

T. Norton

Our 2008 meeting will be on Jekyll Island, GA at the Oceanside Inn and Suites. We have rooms reserved at a discount rate. Please make reservations by August 21, 2008 (1-866-553-5955). The business meeting will be held at and catered by the hotel on Thursday October 2. The special topics day will be Friday October 3 and the main gopher tortoise presentations will be on Saturday October 4. We will have field trips organized for Sunday October 5. Please get in touch with Terry Norton if you are willing to host a field trip or have ideas.

The Georgia Sea Turtle Center will be assisting with the conference; those interested can take a tour of the facility on Friday evening. We will have a low country boil on Friday night and a barbeque on Saturday night.

The special topic for Friday is wildlife and ecosystem health. We would like more talks on ecosystem health and how habitat quality affects wildlife health. We are also interested in having someone present information on herbicide use and how it affects wildlife in the longleaf pine ecosystem. This is an early, general call for papers too. Please contact Terry Norton if you have ideas for this session.



Georgia 2007 State Report

S. Graham

J.W. Jones Ecological Research Center:

- Lora Smith has been contracted for gopher tortoise survey work on Georgia state lands, to be completed ca. 2008.
- Florida State Wildlife Legacy Program grant procured to examine habitat partitioning among three upland snake species: pine, king, and coach-whips. Gabe Miller, University of Florida graduate student, is focusing on pine snake/gopher interactions and radio telemetry had commenced.
- Shannon Hoss (Jones Center alum), defended Master's thesis and will be publishing eastern diamondback rattlers spatial ecology data shortly.
- David Steen, (Jones Center alum) recently joined Craig Guyer's lab at Auburn University (AU), and will continue gathering and examining upland snake data from Ichauway. He is finishing work on kingsnake spatial ecology and future directions will entail a focus on community-scale responses to longleaf pine management.



Road-killed timber rattlesnakes were documented during the bioblitz.

Moody Air Force Base:

- Mitch Lockhart continues work on tortoise *Salmonella* prevalence, URTD, population genetics, and behavior assisted by RFID technology, and has retained a graduate student who will analyze radio telemetry data.

Marion/Miller County:

- Bill Birkhead has two students studying tortoise demography. One is monitoring a small relict population (~20 individuals) in Marion County. They have documented within-game plot movements, and limited between game plot movements. Another student is monitoring another small population in Miller County. They have documented a decline from 1997 to 2007 (30 to 20 active burrows). These small, fragmented populations may be typical of many current tortoise populations.

St. Catherine's Island:

- Terry Norton is interested in apparent kingsnake declines. He requests fresh roadkills, view the GTC website for details.

Bioblitzes:

- Sean Graham (AU), with help from several folks, notably Andrew Durso and Kerry Nelson of the University of Georgia (UGA), organized two herp bioblitzes in the Talladega Uplands. These ridges are known for their relict mountain longleaf pine stands and odd mixtures of montane species. Most searching took place in Paulding Forest and Sheffield wildlife management areas. In about four total days, approximately 45 species and 40 new county records were documented. Participants included folks from AU, Georgia State University, UGA, and Ichauway. AU dominated both competitions. War Eagle. At the time of this writing UGA could not be

"In about four total days, approximately 45 species and 40 new county records were documented."

reached for comment on their alleged species totals for the Oct 5-7 bioblitz. Graham and the AU team are now accepting challenges and/or suggestions for future bioblitz locations.

Plant Vogel:

- Reestablishing waif tortoises from Florida in cooperation with GA DNR. Contact John Jensen, GA Department of Natural Resources (DNR) for more information.

Department of Natural Resources:

- Current projects include sandhill inventory using GIS.
- Jim Ozier has completed his pocket gopher study.

Fort Stewart:

- Dirk Stevenson has concluded his indigo snake mark-recapture project. Over 100 snakes were captured (~70 males:35 females). A manuscript is in preparation.
- In cooperation with DNR and a consulting firm, ~18 tortoises successfully relocated from Cumberland Harbor development site to Ft. Stewart.



New Tortoise Permitting Guidelines

FWC Press Release

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) Wednesday (4/9/08) approved the Gopher Tortoise Permitting Guidelines, the first major step in launching the tortoise management plan approved by the Commission last September. The FWC reclassified the gopher tortoise to a threatened species last year, and the management plan serves as a blueprint to conserve the species. It is a framework for helping Florida decrease tortoise mortality on lands proposed for development.

Under the permitting guidelines, tortoises must be relocated out of harm's way by an authorized agent, who will obtain a permit from the FWC. All permits will require some type of mitigation contribution – in the past, some permits were at no cost. The new permitting system is designed to create incentives for those who relocate tortoises to protected land. Those permit holders who move tortoises to protected, high-quality, managed habitat, will contribute the least for permits. That's because the higher quality the habitat, the better chance the tortoises will have to perpetuate the species...

(Cont. on page 5)

Wildlife Society Meeting

Mark your calendars and make your plans! The National Wildlife Society's 2008 annual conference is being hosted by the Florida Chapter of The Wildlife Society in Miami, 8 -12 November. Come join us for a terrific agenda of symposia, general session presentations, social events, and field trips. Do it now, before sea level rise makes it impossible!

<http://joomla.wildlife.org/miami08/>

Ashton Honored

For his work on gopher tortoises, Ray E. Ashton, Jr., president of the Ashton Biodiversity Research & Preservation Institute, Inc., in Newberry, Florida, and one of the founders of The Gopher Tortoise Conservation Initiative, was awarded the 2008 Citizen's Award at the 14th Annual Public Interest Environmental Conference held at the University of Florida Law School on 28 February 2008.

Moler Award Winners Announced

Dr. Perran Ross, Ms. Joan Berish, and Mr. Greg Holder were awarded the 2nd Paul Moler Herpetological Conservation Award at the Florida Chapter of The Wildlife Society's spring meeting in March. They were recognized for their leadership roles in developing the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's (FWC) new Gopher Tortoise Management Plan. Dr. Ross, Ms. Berish, and Mr. Holder have made a truly significant contribution to gopher tortoise conservation range-wide, while demonstrating the finest points of teamwork, cooperation, and stamina under pressure. In their acceptance of the award, all three gratefully acknowledged the participation and dedication of the FWC GT 2 team, the scientific review panel, and the large group of stakeholders that were all intricately involved in the management plan development process. However, the three award recipients provided the leadership that brought the plan to fruition. They went well beyond the call of professional duty to a level that can only be described as coming from their hearts. There could be no better tribute to Paul Moler, a man who exemplifies this degree of commitment, than to confer his award to them.



Paul Moler Herpetological Conservation Award ceremony, March 2008, Kampong National Botanical Garden, Coconut Grove I - r: Joan Berish, award recipient; Becky Bolt, FLTWS Conservation Committee Chairperson; Jay Exum, FLTWS President; Greg Holder, award recipient not pictured - Perran Ross, award recipient

Tortoise Permitting Guidelines (cont.)

which is the goal of the management plan.

The permitting system also is designed to provide incentives to landowners to manage their land for tortoises and other native wildlife. Landowners may qualify for having their land certified and permitted as protected recipient sites eligible for receiving displaced tortoises. Proposed changes to the guidelines will be reviewed annually by an FWC standing team and a public stakeholder advisory group. The Gopher Tortoise Permitting Guidelines are available at

www.MyFWC.com/permits/protected-wildlife/permits.html#gophertortoise

News and Announcements from the GTCI

R. Ashton

Available Books:

R.E. Ashton and P.S. Ashton 2008. *The Natural History and Management of the Gopher Tortoise, Gopherus polyphemus* (Daudin). Krieger Press. This book reviews previous research and the years of research done by the Ashton's and their students on the natural history of the tortoise, their burrows, forage based habitat descriptions. The second half of the book are the "how to" sections that cover everything from bucket trapping to establishing and monitoring relocation sites. The work on foraging and communication are considered by many as major breakthroughs in tortoise work and planning conservation.

P.S.Ashton and R.E. Ashton 2004. *Gopher tortoise, a Life History*. Pineapple Press. This is the family or teacher version and is written in a way that adults can answer questions and learn about the natural history and what is involved with habitat management and protection of the tortoise.

Announcements:

The third Special Session of Administration of the Gopher Tortoise Management and Relocation Professional Course has been scheduled for April 17-18 2008. The details of this course and registration information and forms are on www.Ashtonbiodiversity.org.

For information on how to obtain on-site training for tortoise surveys, excavations, and evaluation of recipient sites, and to learn about the summer session for the 3 day Basic Training or "Tortoise Boot Camp" and other courses that will be offered this next summer go to www.Ashtonbiodiversity.org.

Gopher Tortoise Council Gets Social

Profiles for the Gopher Tortoise Council have been created on social networking sites MySpace: <http://www.myspace.com/gophertortoiseCouncil> and Facebook. It is our hope that these sites will allow more individuals to learn about the work of The Gopher Tortoise Council and of conservation and ecology in general. Check them out.



Newsletter of The Gopher Tortoise Council

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Please view the GTC website (below) for contact information

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The Tortoise Burrow

<http://www.gophertortoisecouncil.org>

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