



This is a reproduction of a previous Gopher Tortoise Council newsletter. This document has been altered from its original presentation so that information, news, and notable content can be preserved. Formatting, spelling, and grammar have been maintained to the extent possible. If possible, original images from the document have been included in these reproductions. The current and recent newsletters of the Gopher Tortoise Council, *The Tortoise Burrow*, can be found on the Council's website [here](#). Personal information, such as addresses and phone numbers have been redacted from this document.

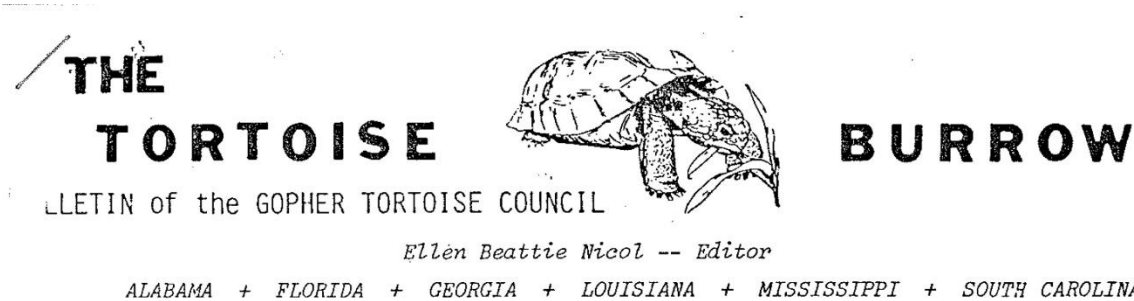


Image: Original artwork and letterhead for the newsletter of the Gopher Tortoise Council

1983 Gopher Tortoise Council Annual Meeting - - - 28 & 29 October 1983

At VALDOSTA STATE COLLEGE, Valdosta, GA

Located just north of the Florida-Georgia line, off I-75. Local arrangements are being made by Mrs. Bette Bechtel. Social beings 7 PM Friday evening; beer and munchies provided. Annual meeting begins 8:30 AM Saturday, exact location not known at this time. John Eisenberg, mammalogist and ecologist at the University of Florida will give the Conservation Address. Other speakers will include representatives of the Desert Tortoise Council, Martha Young, of the California Turtle and Tortoise Club, Laurie Rask, Ellen Nicol and Dick Franz. Dan Speake will demonstrate his "hole-looker" for seeing into burrows, and there will be a panel discussion concerning tortoise races. Annual dues will be collected at the meeting; those not in attendance are urged to renew their dues by mail - - \$10.00 per year, payable to Gopher Tortoise Council and mailed to Gainesville. You don't want to miss future issues of THE TORTOISE BURROW!

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VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT: Dr. Jim Hogan

By: Beatrice Kirk

The San Antonio Rattlesnake Festival originated with a handful of members. As the festival grew in both size and scope, it reached out to involve members of the community as volunteers. One of the volunteers who ensures the success of the annual festival is Dr. James Horgan, Chairman, Division of Social Science at Saint Leo College. Dr. Horgan began his involvement with the festival back in 1967 and became part of the tradition of the gopher races.

The idea of the gopher races was initially a hit or miss proposition. But from the beginning, it has always been a big part of the excitement. The construction of the race track and the method of conducting such a race was puzzling at first, but the “bugs” were soon ironed out. Now Dr. Horgan oversees and conducts the registration of entrants. The “gopher jockeys” are divided into groups according to age. Numerous “heat” races are conducted before the Grand Finale of the International Championship Race. Horgan moves tirelessly throughout the day ensuring that the contestants as well as the spectators are enjoying the event. He professes that he enjoys the day as much as anyone! Jim Horgan is a fine example of the over 200 volunteers whose efforts ensure the enjoyment and pleasure of so many. (Races are held third Saturday in October annually.)

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SURVIVAL OF THE GOPHER TORTOISE: Who Cares Anyway?

By: Edward Herrmann

As a youngster growing up in San Antonio, I really paid little attention to the gopher tortoises in the area. Of course, I knew they were around and that they dug holes and that snakes also live in gopher holes so “you’d better be careful around those gopher holes.” I also knew they were thought of as being good to eat and although they weren’t part of my day-to-day diet, I can recall taking great pleasure in occasionally finding a large one to give to a friend who “just loved” gopher stew or gopher and rice. I even ate some of his from time to time when we would trade lunches, and it was delectable.

I couldn’t do that now. I’ve learned a lot about gophers since the inception of the Festival in 1967 with its gopher races as a special feature. I’m no expert by any stretch of the imagination but I have studied the critters a bit, and what I’ve learned has given me cause for concern about their continued existence.

The gopher tortoise has been around for countless millennia. It is built like a tank. In fact, its family name, Testudinidae, has the Latin root meaning “shielded”. It can survive a lot of

tough blows in nature. What it cannot survive is man's onslaught. The way things are going, the gopher doesn't have much of a chance for survival. I don't mean to imply that the gopher will meet its demise in our lifetimes, but it is becoming more and more difficult for the species to stand up to man. I know there are those who will say "that's what they said about the alligator and look what's happening now. They are having to schedule gator hunts to control the population." But the biology is different. The reproduction just doesn't work the same. Boy, would I welcome the day that I could be proved wrong and gopher hunts would be needed to get the gopher population slimmed down.

As it is, if man were to stop eating gophers immediately it would be ages until there could be anything even approaching the early numbers. For you see, gophers have in common with man a long period of life before reaching reproductive age. Female gophers in our area of Florida reach sexual maturity at 10 to 15 years. In the north end of their range, females mature at 19 to 21 years of age. Males in our locale reach maturity at 16 to 18. Gophers are known to live 60 years, and there is one that is said to have reached the ripe old age of 80. Given the high mortality of hatchlings, that longevity is about the only thing they have going for them.

There are several predators of gophers with the most important being the raccoon and the armadillo. These two destroy nests as such an extent that if half the eggs laid in the spring are hatched it is a minor miracle. A recent study in Georgia indicated that there may be a successful hatch only one year in ten. Those that do hatch are attacked by such diverse predators as imported fire ants, snakes and birds of prey. Those that survive are finally met headon by the most severe predator of all – MAN.

It is hard to tell which is the greater problem, but there are two principal villains here: man, the casual land developer who rips out the gophers habitat in the name of progress; and man, thoughtless eater of gopher flesh in the mythical belief that it is a delicacy possessing great powers. Man, the developer, is someone we'll have to live with, for the land the gophers chose is also desired by man. The sandhills are sought after for houses for the same reason the gopher selects them - - they provide well-drained homesites.

Destruction of the habitat doesn't seem to be the main problem, for you can still find thousands of unspoiled acres with few gophers populating them. While it is true that destruction of ALL habitat would spell doom for the species, it is also true that when the last gopher is gone, all the habitat in the world won't bring it back.

As an example of what human predation can do, take this following case: An officer of the FGFWFC caught a gopher puller in the Ft. White area with 20 gophers for sale. The puller, a man in his 60's, related that his customers bought gophers to eat because they were "good for ailments" in general and for "high blood pressure" in particular. He also said that gopher meat has aphrodisiac qualities. This man confessed that he had been pulling since the 1930's and that now he had to travel 25 to 30 miles to find gophers as there were no more in the Ft. White area.

So it would seem that human predation is the culprit. And it is so senseless. It is reported that an eating size gopher – and that's not a very big one these days – is selling for around \$5. in rural Central Florida. In urban areas, those who seek out the special powers contained in gopher meat are said to be willing to pay \$10. or even \$15. for a gopher. And that's on the hoof. Consider the quantity of butchered and trimmed meat those amounts of money would purchase at the local market and you will see that gopher meat is not sought, as it was in the days of the Great Depression, because it is the cheapest of meats, but because of the myths regarding its aphrodisiacal powers.

If the gopher is to be saved, there must be a stop put to the slaughter of gophers for meat. In light of what is happening with the gopher population, there can be no justification for the continued capture and sale of gophers as food. But the above concerns are valid only if someone cares. And who cares anyway? What good do gophers do? For one thing, if we lose the gopher it's only the beginning. Several other species will no doubt be wiped out as well. Among them are the already endangered Eastern Indigo snake (gopher snake), the gopher frog, and several species of spiders. In all there is confirmed information of 28 vertebrate species and countless insects that are hosted by the lowly gopher tortoise.

But again, so what? Isn't it entirely natural for species to become extinct? Isn't that what "natural selection" is all about? Where are the dinosaurs? Yes, it is natural for the universe to lose species and it was an entirely natural process that brought about the demise of the dinosaur. What we're talking about here is the unnatural continued use of an animal as a food source when that animal cannot reproduce quickly enough to replenish itself under those pressures brought to bear by man. THINK ABOUT IT! Can there be any justification for the continued slaughter of this valued animal?

(The above articles appeared in RATTLESNAKE FESTIVAL, Saturday, October 16, 1982)

THE SLOW AND STEADY DECLINE OF THE GOPHER TORTOISE

...Gophers may finish last in the race for survival

By Richard Franz and Diana Tonnessen

West Floridians call them "low ham steers" because their nutritious meat has been used to take the place of expensive supermarket cuts when times were hard. Some people mistakenly believe their flesh works both as an aphrodisiac and a cure for high blood pressure. Those that aren't served as an entrée in finer restaurants may be entered in some of the South's slowest-moving races, where they plod along to the finish line with a little prodding from behind.

While the gopher tortoise is first in flavor and a favorite at tortoise races for some people, it may finish last in the race for survival as early as the year 2000. Urbanization, intensive farming, commercial hunting and races threaten not only the “gopher,” as it is commonly called in the Southeast, but a host of other endangered species who depend on its hospitality to survive. The threatened Indigo snake, the rare Florida mouse and Florida gopher frog, and several threatened invertebrates, all find the gopher’s cozy home a year-round haven for themselves. Without the gopher tortoise, these species could perish.

The large land tortoises dig their homes throughout the southeastern coastal region of the U.S. They prefer areas with well-drained sandy soils to keep their burrows dry, plenty of grasses and low plant growth for food, and open, sunny areas for nesting. Up to 28 feet long and 10 feet deep, gopher holes maintain a fairly constant temperature year-round to protect against the hot sun and cold winds. The burrows even act as shelters against brush fires that occur frequently in these dry, scrubby areas.

The burrows provide protection for many more animals than the gopher tortoise. Over 32 species have been known to seek shelter in the gopher’s burrow at one time or another. Along with Indigo snakes, gopher frogs, and Florida mice, the gopher has hosted skunks, rattlesnakes, opossums, rats, rabbits, quail, armadillos, burrowing owls, lizards, frogs, toads and a great many unique insects under its roof.

While the adult gopher tortoise has few natural enemies, its slowness is a deadly handicap against its most damaging predator – man. Slow-moving tortoises cannot escape commercial hunters trying to supply the demand for gopher meat, nor can they reproduce quickly enough to replenish their losses in numbers - - usually entire colonies. Female tortoises in north Florida take 10 to 15 years to reach an age at which they can reproduce. While they may lay up to 15 eggs each year, an average “clutch” consists of 5 to 7 eggs. The long incubation period - - 80 to 90 days in Florida - - usually ends in disaster for nine out of 10 clutches of eggs, though. Racoons, foxes, skunks and humans destroy more than 80 percent of the gopher tortoise nests.

Many times, the biggest and best tortoises - - usually the most sexually reproductive members - - are removed from the colonies for tortoise races. Although many are released after the races, it is not known whether gopher tortoises can adapt to a new environment when moved, even if the habitat seems appropriate to humans. Urbanization, farming and timber practices in the tortoises’ natural habitat have also squeezed out the animals to make room for man.

The gopher tortoise has been declared a Species of Special Concern under Florida law, although it still appears on the game list. Limits have been placed on the number of gophers that can be taken from a colony, and the law prohibits hunting during the turtle’s reproductive season (April 1 to June 30). While many of these laws are difficult to enforce, they do represent a growing concern and care for the gopher tortoise - - the lifeblood of the sandhill community.

(From FLORIDA STATE MUSEUM NOTES – January-February 1983)

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Late one afternoon, one of our pet gophers was out of its burrow grazing. The weather had been very dry; I was sprinkling the lawn with the hose and sprayed over the carapace of the tortoise. At that, the tortoise put its head down and raised its hind legs. When I stopped spraying, it lowered itself flat and grazed, but when the spray was again directed on its back, it raised its rear - - repeatedly. It appears the tortoise was using its back as a water chute, and drinking the water as it ran off the end of its nose.

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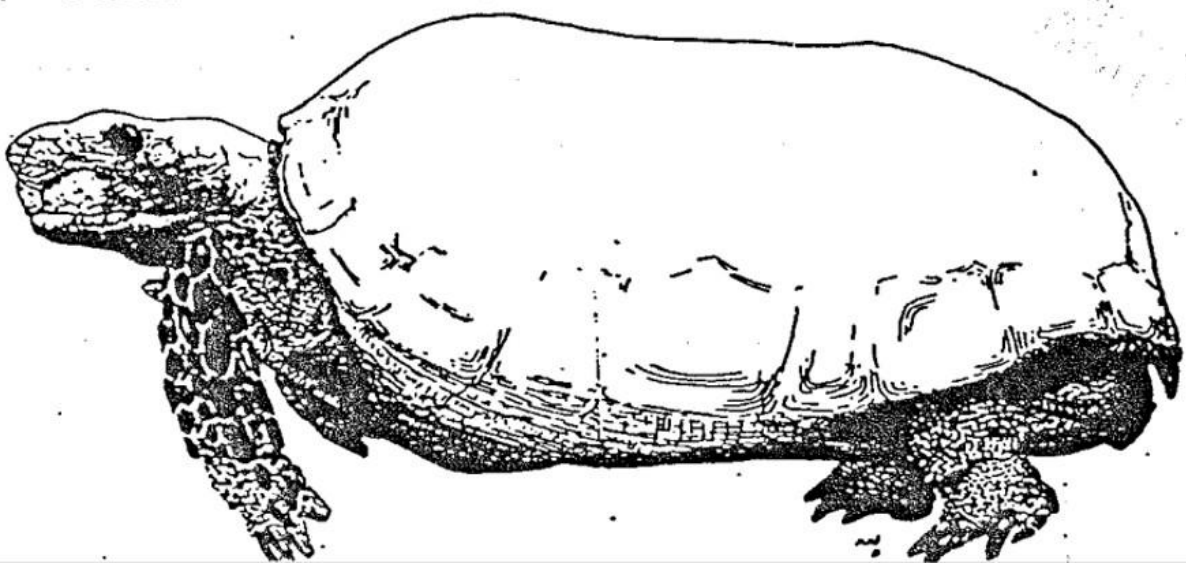


Image: Original artwork for the newsletter of the Gopher Tortoise Council.

This document was created and transcribed by Bradley O'Hanlon
April 2026