



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.

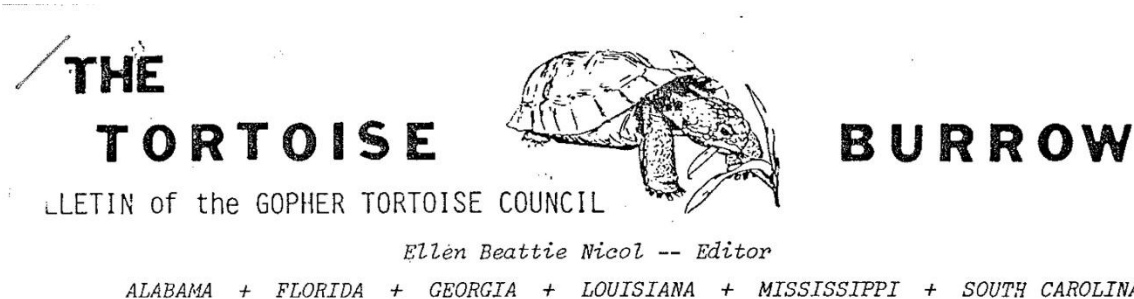


Image: Original artwork and letterhead for the newsletter of the Gopher Tortoise Council

REPORT OF THE 1983 GOPHER TORTOISE COUNCIL MEETING, 28 & 29 OCTOBER

Registration and a social were held at Saddle Bags, with facilities and refreshments provided by Owens-Illinois Inc., from 7 to 10 PM Friday Evening

The meeting got underway at 9:05 AM on Saturday, Oct. 29 at Valdosta State college, with these arrangements courtesy of Mrs. Bette Bechtel. Meeting speakers were:

Dr. Hugh Bailey, President of Valdosta State College

Dr. John Upchurch, Dean of School of Arts, VSC

Dr. John F. Eisenberg, Florida State Museum and University of Florida. He spoke on other wildlife in a tortoise burrow and importance of burrow to these.

Dr. Steven P. Christman, FSM – “Timber Management is Not Wildlife Management

Laurie M. Rask, 1982 Award Winner – Diet of the Gopher Tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) in Long Leaf Pine--Turkey Oak Sandhill Habitats in Central Florida.”

Edward Wester, 1982 Award Winner – “Island Populations of Gopher Tortoises in a Reservoir.”

STATE REPORTS:

Dr. Dan Speake, Alabama

Dr. James Dobie, Alabama

Joan Deimer, Florida

Dr. Harold Wahlquist, Georgia

Ren Lohofener, Mississippi and Louisiana

Bob Jones, Mississippi

Major Joseph Ward, USAF, Florida

No representative from S.C.

A framed sketch of a gopher tortoise was awarded to Dick Franz for his work at Florida State Museum in connection with preservation of the tortoise and with GTC.

Ellen Nicol read a letter from Gil MacAdam, Chief Naturalist, Broward County, Florida concerning a sanctuary for tortoises. (Copy of letter in this issue of TTB)

Dr. Dale Jackson presented the 1983 Awards to Raymond Novotny and Harry Osterman, both in Florida - - \$200.00 to each recipient for research and report due 1984.

Martha Young, representing California Turtle and Tortoise Club, Los Angeles, spoke on activities of that Club.

Ellen Nicol, "Role of Turtles and Tortoises as Pets."

A panel discussion on the subject of tortoise racing was held, with Joan Diemer, Dr. Robert Taylor and Ed Herrmann as panelists.

A brief business meeting was held: Dr. Peter C. H. Pritchard to continue his second year as Co-Chairman, Dr. Dale Jackson elected to his first year (1983-1985) as Co-Chairman, Dr. Robert Taylor to continue as Treasurer, Ellen Nicol, Secretary and Bette Bechtel as Membership Secretary.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:15 PM, when attendees were invited on a field trip to Marshall Farm, by Dr. Dan Speake. There Dan demonstrated his "hole-looker", which was a device used to see down into a tortoise burrow. A small television screen was set up near the burrow, and a camera on the end of a flexible tube was introduced. The tortoise could be seen in the burrow, and later a snake was put down into the burrow, and interaction between the snake and the tortoise could be viewed.

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Treasurer Robert Taylor reported a treasure balance as of 14 November 1983 as \$1,282.64.

Following this issue of THE TORTOISE BURROW, there will be a review of the dues status and those who have no paid dues will not be continued as members and will not receive the newsletter, nor the copy of proceedings of the Annual Meeting. Dues are the only source of revenue for the GTC, the publications are costly to produce and mail, and there is much work to be done to preserve the gopher tortoise. If you believe in this cause, kindly support the Council by membership and by publicizing our efforts at every opportunity.

Bumper stickers are available from Ellen Nicol, Rt. #, BOX #####, Anthony Florida 32617 at a cost of \$1.00 each, plus 20¢ postage for each ONE or TWO mailed. These are good quality vinyl stickers 3" x 15", with green background, white printing and a yellow tortoise in the center. Wording says "Save the Gopher" on the left and "Florida State Museum, Gainesville, Florida" on the right.

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Copy of letter read at meeting:

Parks and Recreation Division
#.#. ##### St.
Oakland, Park, FL 33309
###-###-####

October 21, 1983

Ellen B. Nicol
Rt. # BOX #####
Anthony, FL 32617

Dear Ellen:

My gopher tortoise project on Deerfield Island County Park has been very successful. The Broward County Commission, last month, passed unanimously a resolution declaring the island an official sanctuary for the tortoise. These were the two official steps which I needed to get accomplished for preliminary sanctuary status. The final step will be a vote by the Game and Fish Commission in January for sanctuary status for the island.

A field count showed 15 active burrows on the tract. The island is an old spoil dumping site used by the Corps of Engineers, so this may be the first spoil site in the state that is an official tortoise sanctuary. The sand on the site is deep, mixed with coquina and oolitic limestone.

Since this is the first official gopher tortoise sanctuary in Broward County, the effort has helped to show the way for other projects in our area. A tortoise-plant preservation project has been started near the Executive Airport, headed by two biologists active in the native plant society.

As you can see, there is concern for the gopher tortoise in Broward.

I can't make it to the Valdosta meeting, but I'd appreciate you announcing my successful efforts. If you see Valerie Carlson from West Palm, thank her for assisting in the field count at Deerfield Island.

Sincerely,
Gil MacAdam
Chief Park Naturalist

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More from Ft. Lauderdale.....

GOPHER TURTLES FIND REFUGE AT DEERFIELD ISLAND PARK By Maria Rito Valerio

Scaly reptiles such as the gopher tortoise don't evoke the tender emotions many people have for more attractive creatures. For Chief Park Naturalist Gil MacAdam, the nondescript tortoise is something rather special. Officially classified as an animal "of special concern," two steps below an endangered species classification, the gopher tortoise recently received a sanctuary through the efforts of MacAdam.

Last week, Broward County Commissioners unanimously approved a resolution naming Deerfield Island Park a sanctuary for the swindling species. According to MacAdam, "there are already about 20 gopher tortoises on the island and several very active burrows." Approximately 70 percent of the 56 acre island is suitable habitat for the reptiles which make their homes on the same high, dry land areas prized by developers.

The once abundant tortoises are rapidly declining in number because of urban development which destroys their homes. Predators, human and animal, also deplete the gopher tortoise's dwindling population.

The tortoises, which grow approximately 12 inches long, burrow into the earth, building homes for themselves and producing a haven for many other animals. A gopher tortoise's life revolves around its burrow, which can be up to 28 feet long and ten feet deep. The little known reptiles like to feed on broadleaf grasses and legumes but will also eat gopher apples, pawpaws, blackberries, and other fruits.

Visitors at Deerfield Island Park may catch a glimpse of the shy creatures with the assistance of the park rangers who know exactly where each burrow is located. MacAdam hopes the sanctuary status for the island will draw attention to the fact that the gopher tortoise is disappearing throughout the state and especially in South Florida. "As all the gopher tortoises in the county disappear, we'll have one area where they won't disappear," he said.

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From the Valdosta Daily Times, Fri., Nov. 4, 1983:

Council Meets at VSC
FRIENDS OF GOPHER TORTOISES UNITE By Tom Mather

About 50 people gathered in a farm field near Hahira last weekend to watch a live television show. The program wasn't broadcast over the airwaves, it didn't feature any human actors, and it didn't have any commercials.

A camera recording the action was underground – enclosed in a 20 foot long, two-inch diameter plastic tube. The show was transmitted by closed circuit line to a small blue television set laying on the grass. What the group saw wasn't typical television fare.

As the cameraman pushed the tube into a hole in the ground, the camera's wide-angle lens made the walls of a small sandy burrow appear to race past – like film footage from a car race.

Then the camera stopped. Appearing on the TV screen was a football-sized turtle, a gopher tortoise to be precise. The tortoise dragged itself toward the camera and then turned. It seemed perturbed by the bright lights emitted by the intruder. The audience crowded around the TV

screen to get a better view. Their concentration was intense. Some smiled. They were seeing live what they had been hearing about all day long in meetings, reports, and panel discussions: a gopher tortoise in its natural habitat.

The people standing there were mostly members of The Gopher Tortoise Council, which held its annual meeting at Valdosta State College last Friday and Saturday. Dr. Dan Speake, a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, was demonstrating his “hole looker,” a device used for monitoring and researching gopher tortoises.

Earlier in the day GTC members had heard presentations at the college on a variety of subjects: management of forests for wildlife, eating habitats of gopher tortoises; status reports on gopher populations; tortoises as pets; and tortoise racing.

About 75 to 80 people registered for the meeting, according to Bette Bechtel, coordinator of the event and an assistant professor of biology at VSC. “we’re just trying to make this animal as well-known as possible,” Ms. Bechtel said. “Most of the things we’re interested in are just to see the gopher tortoise maintain its status quo.

The Gopher Tortoise Council (GTC) was formed in 1978 by people concerned about the declining gopher tortoise populations. “Its sole purpose is to find ways to conserve the gopher tortoise and the environment they live in,” said Richard Franz, a member of the Council and professor at the University of Florida.

Gopher tortoises live in dry, sunny habitats – like pine scrub and oak forests, pastures, and old fields. To thrive, they need three basic conditions: well-drained sandy soils for digging burrows; sufficient low plant growth for food; and open sunny areas for nesting. Gopher tortoises have seen some rough times in recent years, mostly from man’s activities.

Although their populations have been declining, gophers are not protected by federal endangered species laws. They are, however, protected by laws in Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina and Mississippi. Georgia classifies the tortoise as a non-game species and requires a scientific permit for possession.

Habitat destruction is probably their biggest problem. Urban development, intensive farming and dense planting of commercial pine forests have all contributed to the loss of gopher tortoise habitats. That’s because some people consider tortoises a delicacy. They may be legally hunted in Florida.

Another related problem is tortoise racing. Such races are sometimes held at festivals and fairs. A problem arises when the races are over, because the tortoises are not always returned to their proper habitats. At one race, Ms. Bechtel saw, she said tortoises were thrown in a river when the race was over.

“I don’t believe that tortoises should be raced,” she said. “I don’t think that animals should be abused for man’s entertainment.”

Some people unknowingly do harm when they catch tortoises for pets,” Ms. Bechtel said. “It’s not good to take them out of the population,” she said, “because you remove them from reproduction.” That can be a serious problem. Because tortoises are slow-growing taking 15 years or more to reach sexual maturity.

One aim of the GTC is to conduct research that may help tortoises survive. An example of such research is the underground camera demonstrated at the meeting. Another example is some research now being conducted by VSC biology students, according to Ms. Bechtel. Those students are studying six baby tortoises that they hatched from eggs found at a farm. But the laboratory is only a temporary home for the tortoises. “We’ll put them back into the wild,” she said.

(Ed. Note: A photo of Bette and Tommy Marshall with the six baby tortoises accompanied this article)

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And also from the Valdosta Daily Times 11-1-83, sent in by Writer Tom Mather

TORTOISES CALL CLINCH BACK YARD HOME

By: Martin Register

As of today, Smarty Pants and Lazy Bones are still taking occasional walks out into the sunshine. It won’t be long, however, until their midday amblings will cease and they’ll settle into the security of their burrows for a couple of months until the last of winter’s hard freezes are over.

Smarty Pants and Lazy Bones are the names given to two gopher tortoises by Lulu Stalvey, a sort of surrogate mother to the two after they took up residence in her back yard. Gopher tortoises are

somewhat rare in the sandy flatlands of Clinch County, and there has been little authoritative research done about them, although the Gopher Tortoise Council, an organization dedicated to studying them and protecting them, met over the weekend in Valdosta.

Mrs. Stalvey, already sort of a self-educated expert on the plants and animals of the piney woods, took the appearance of the tortoises in her yard as a chance to learn an additional thing or two. In the four years in which the tortoises have lived in Ms. Stalvey's back yard, she has learned they have a taste for clover, lettuce, and sweet potato vines. It's been said she could tame a tiger. "And if I wanted to, I probably could," said Ms. Stalvey, who takes in a steady supply of wayward strays and just recently nursed an injured bird back to health by supplying it a place to stay and mil until it was strong enough to fly.

The gopher tortoises aren't exactly ferocious beasts, but Ms. Stalvey has them eating out of her hand -- literally. She keeps around a good supply of lettuce for her trips into the yard, during which she calls the gophers -- by name -- and waits patiently for their heads to pop out of their burrows and for the animals to lumber forward for a midday snack.

She has a sweet potato vine growing between their burrows. All of the leaves which reach ground level have been gnawed away and Ms. Stalvey says Smarty Pants even stood up on his back feet one day in an effort to reach the tender growth which was just out of his reach.

Smarty Pants received his name in his first year, when Ms. Stalvey started a hole for him and he finished up the job, sending dirt flying as he dug a burrow for the winter. Lazy Bones, however, waited until his compatriot had finished his work, then simply followed him into the burrow and settled in. Eventually, Lazy Bones did dig his own burrow, but he took his time about it, Ms. Stalvey says.

Although Ms. Stalvey has learned a great deal from the animals, she says she doesn't really know how to tell a male from a female. Both Smarty Pants and Lazy Bones still have the yellow spots which identify them as young, immature animals. Ms. Stalvey has heard tortoises have a life span similar to that of humans, and she hopes to be able to study them as long as they remain in her yard.

Already she knows they are somewhat temperamental. For instance, they are likely not to show themselves if there are visitors in the yard, and they refuse to come out of their burrows in cloudy weather, preferring instead clear days when they can bask in the sunshine.

Soon, Ms. Stalvey knows, the animals will burrow down one last time for the season and go into a sort of hibernation while harsh winter frosts blanket the ground. Late last winter, when a wet spell hit, Ms. Stalvey went out into her yard and found the burrows brimming full with water. At first, she feared she had lost her pets, but she eventually found the water-logged tortoises in the grass near the burrows. For several days after that, the gophers spent their time near a heater in the dining room, feasting on lettuce until the water level went down and they were able to return to their homes.

Ms. Stalvey isn't anticipating any further problems, but when the time comes, she'll be ready to defend her tenants. "I don't want anybody messing with my gophers," she said.

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The editor welcomes any and all material, either newspaper clips or personal experiences with gophers. Please get involved with YOUR NEWSLETTER and help make it informative. Talk to anyone you can about gopher tortoises, and try to get new members for the organization. There is strength in numbers! If you know of a potential new member, send me address and I'll forward a free TTB. Send request to me in Anthony, FL. EBN.

***** HAPPY HOLIDAYS TO ALL *****

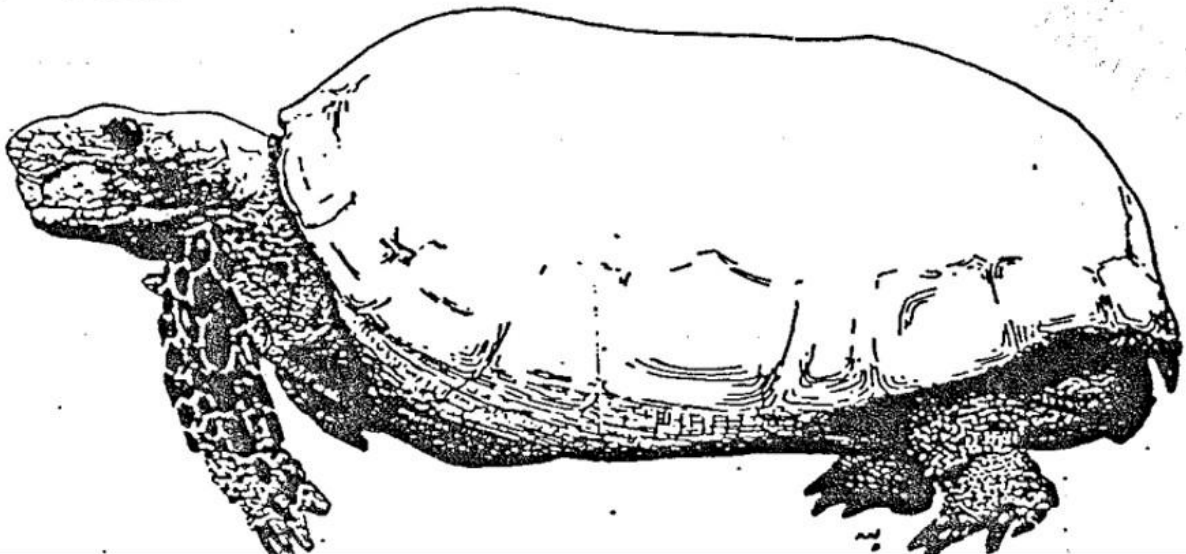


Image: Original artwork for the newsletter of the Gopher Tortoise Council.