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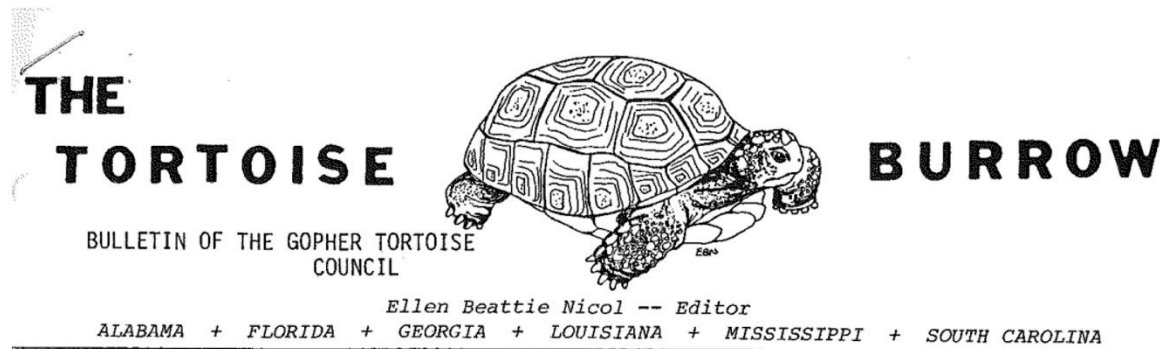


Image: Original artwork and letterhead for the newsletter of the Gopher Tortoise Council

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE GOPHER TORTOISE COUNCIL'S CO-CHAIRMEN

Term: 1982 to 1984 Dr. Peter C. H. Pritchard, Vice President, Science and Research,
Florida Audubon Society, #####, Maitland, FL 32751.

Peter was born in Hertfordshire, England and was a Scholar at Magdalen College, Oxford University, England, where he earned his Bachelors Degree, with Honors in Chemistry in 1965. He then went to the University of Florida where he earned his Doctorate in Zoology, studying ridley sea turtles under the direction of Dr. Archie Carr. In 1967, Peter authored the book "Living Turtles of the World" that became the turtle collectors' general reference book all over the world.

Currently he serves on the IUCN Specialist Groups for tortoises, fresh water turtles and sea turtles. He is Co-leader of U.S. Sea Turtle Recovery Team, and was series editor for "Rare and Endangered Biota of Florida."

Peter's large volume on chelonians, "Encyclopedia of Turtles" was produced several years ago and is widely distributed. Another volume, "Turtles of Venezuela", is in the final stages of production. In addition, he has written 80 or so publications on sea turtles and has done field work in most countries of Central America and northern South America, many Caribbean islands, the Galapagos, Micronesia, Papua, New Guinea, New Caledonia and others.

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Term: 1983 to 1985 Dr. Dale Jackson, Zoologist for the Florida Natural Areas Inventory,
The Nature Conservancy, ### # # # # # # # # # # Avenue, Tallahassee, FL 32303.

Dale is zoologist for the Florida Natural Areas Inventory, one of approximately 30 state natural heritage programs developed by The Nature Conservancy to assist states in identifying and protecting their natural resources. Although responsible for directing the inventory of all of Florida's rare and endangered animals, Dale still tries to find the time to keep up his herpetological research. He has published several scientific papers on the evolution and ecology of Florida's reptiles, particularly its diverse freshwater turtle fauna, and currently is describing a number of fossil sites he has excavated in Florida and Central America. He also serves as a member of the IUCN-SSC (International Union for the Conservation of the Nature - Species Survival Commission) freshwater chelonian specialist group, and has assisted the state of Alabama with development of its Nongame program. Prior to joining The Nature Conservancy, Dale served three years as an assistant professor of biology at the University of South Florida. He holds bachelor and doctoral degrees in zoology from Eastern Illinois University and the University of Florida, respectively.

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A MESSAGE FROM THE CO-CHAIR

The Gopher Tortoise Council was established in 1978 by a group of scientists and concerned citizens whose goal was to work for long-term protection of the tortoise and its living associates throughout the southeastern United States. Although our efforts have produced some notable victories in this regard (e.g., full legal protection of wild tortoises in states), the gopher tortoise and its xeric habitats continue to decline throughout the southeast at an alarming rate. I, therefore, admonish each member of the GTC to recommit him/herself to our avowed purpose and to make a deliberate participatory effort during 1984 to help achieve success.

To be effective, we must be not only the consciousness of a movement but also the source of thorough scientific data and knowledge about the gopher tortoise throughout its range. Further, we must assure that this knowledge is brought to the attention of appropriate agencies (federal, state, military, local and private) that have the legal authority to help us meet our goals. Although recent research by many of our members and student award recipients has contributed to our ecological understanding of the gopher tortoise, I see an even more dire need for a thorough, current and unified inventory of this species' remaining populations throughout its range. Previous surveys by Auffenberg and Franz as well as those of several state and federal agencies must be updated so that governmental agencies and private organizations can have available a comprehensive data base upon which to base their regulatory and land-protection decisions. Although obviously a momentous task, it is well within our scope. In my capacity as zoologist for Florida's natural heritage programs, and with the voluntary assistance of GTC members and other field biologists, I am prepared to take a lead role in this project for Florida, where several state and federal agencies have already pledged their cooperation. I hope to initiate this project early in 1984 and will attempt to coordinate similar efforts with GTC representatives in other states. The help of each member of the GTC is vital to achieving this and other goals of the Council.

Should you know others who share our values, I hope that you will urge them to join us as fellow members and participants in the Gopher Tortoise Council.

---DRJ

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NEW GENUS OF GOPHER TORTOISES

Most recent experts have concurred that the four living species of *Gopherus* belong to two distinct species complexes. The *agassizii* complex includes the desert tortoise, *G. agassizii*, and the Texas tortoise, *G. berlandieri*. The gopher tortoise, *G. polyphemus*, and the Mexican bolson tortoise, *G. flavomarginatus*, comprise the *polyphemus* group. In a recent publication (Copeia 1982:852-867) Bramble presented osteological evidence that the two groups are even more distinct than previously thought -- more distinct, in fact, than many other tortoises that are included in different genera. Accordingly, Bramble proposed a new genus, *Scaptochelys*, be erected for tortoises of the *agassizii* group. The genus *Gopherus* is restricted to the *polyphemus* complex, the group considered by Bramble to be more highly specialized for burrowing. Features distinguishing the two genera include differences in the skull, the structure and size of

the inner and otolith, the shapes of the cervical vertebrae, and several features of the ankle and foot. The two genera have been distinct since at least the Miocene.

---DRJ

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LOUISIANA – MISSISSIPPI – ALABAMA TORTOISE SURVEY

A recent (1983) report submitted by R. D. Jennings and T. H. Fritts to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service provides evidence that gopher tortoise populations have continued to decline during the last decade in the western half of the species' range, while investigating the status of the black pine snake, *Pituophis melanoleucus lodingi* in southeastern Louisiana, southern Mississippi, and southwestern Alabama, Jennings and Fritts opportunistically collected data on the status of the tortoise in these areas. Of 79 locations intensively searched for gopher tortoises, they found active or recently active *Gopherus* burrows or sign at two of five sites in Alabama, ten of 31 sites in Mississippi, and only one of 43 in Louisiana. Although their results do not represent a comprehensive inventory, they do indicate a critical and urgent need for full protection of remaining tortoise populations in those states. GTC members in those states are urged to seek such protection through all appropriate measures. If a formal letter from the GTC to persons or agencies in these states would be helpful, I ask that members from these states please contact me.

---DRJ

(Ed.: In future issues of TTB we will try to examine the tortoise situation in those states in more detail. Let's hear from representatives of those states on the matter.)

Dr. Robert Mount sends word that Dr. Dan Speake was recently given the go-ahead by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to begin a gopher tortoise survey for Alabama, westward to Mobile Bay. Dr. Speake is the Council's representative from Alabama and heads the Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit at Auburn University.

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And from Washington, by correspondence:

December 22, 1983

“...Although a member of the Gopher Tortoise Council, my restriction to the presently icy environs of Washington and lack of research experience within the range of the gopher inhibit my ability to contribute much to the Council except to keep an eye on the Washington scene. In

that regard, I have an item which might be of interest to the Council. On Dec. 30, 1982, the Fish and Wildlife Service published a Vertebrate Notice of Review of species that might be candidates for listing under the provisions of the Endangered Species Act. The gopher and desert tortoises were listed in Category 2, meaning that they are potentially candidates but that not enough data are presently available to propose them formally for listing. At present we are reviewing appropriate data for a revised version of the notice and it appears the gopher will remain in Category 2; the desert tortoise is another matter and we are presently awaiting the completion of a large status report done under contract with the Desert Tortoise Council.

(Address in case anyone wants to write the
OES, encouraging more protected status for
The gopher tortoise)

C. Kenneth Dodd, Jr., Ph.D.
Staff Herpetologist
Office of Endangered Species
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Washington, D.C. 20240

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A GTC member, Christine Schleh, Museum Naturalist at the Jacksonville Museum of Arts and Sciences, is doing her part to promote interest in and conservation of the gopher tortoise. She is going to make April "Gopher Tortoise Month" at the museum, at every opportunity she supplies material and literature on the gopher and generally educates the public about the problems of the tortoise. This is the kind of member the GTC needs. She has written the story that she gives to youngsters at the museum, written in a way that appeals to them at their level. If any progress is to be made in conservation, children must be educated that it is wrong to destroy gophers, so when they become adults they will be able to overcome the tradition of exploitation so prevalent in generations before them. Awareness of the situation is an important step toward encouraging protection for the tortoise.

COME ON DOWN TO MY BURROW

By: Evan Tortoise, as told by Christine Schleh
Naturalist

Hi! My name is Evan. I'm a gopher tortoise. Most folks call me a gopher, some call me a highland turtle, and scientists even have a special name for me. Gopherus polyphemus. Pretty fancy name for a guy with a mug like mine, eh?

Since I'm your new neighbor, I'd like to tell you a little bit about myself. I don't mean to sound vain, but I guess you could say I've got a pretty important job around here. Yes, sir, I'm Nature's Apartment Builder. Now what does that mean? Well, I'll be glad to tell you. I dig burrows, and I'm very good at it. I don't need trucks or bulldozers or any of these things that people need to build homes. I'm born already equipped. I know how to use the parts of my body to do all my digging: just like my ancestors, 60 million years ago that adapted to the burrow life by using their own legs as shovels. I don't need to wear a hard hat, either. My shell protects me just fine.

I don't mean to be picky, but I'll only dig apartments in certain places. I need to live where it is very dry, almost desert-like. I and my fellow gopher tortoise friends have found that areas where long-leaf pine, scrub oak and wiregrass grow, suit us just fine. These places are all very sandy. Water won't sit in muddy puddles, it'll drain right down through the soil and keep our homes dry. Lots of plants grow very low to the ground here. That means we can find food easily. And, of course, like most other Floridians, we like to sunbathe. Long-leaf pine and scrub oak areas have many open sunny places to do just that.

Now gophers do like to stick together. Usually about 11 or 12 of us will live right near each other. We call this housing development a colony. Let me make one thing perfectly clear. These burrow apartments I build are not just holes in the ground, they're first rate dwellings. Energy efficient, too. I dig just deep enough so that the temperature stays the same all year long. In fact, I dig 10 feet deep and 30 feet straight ahead. My buddies and I are so proud of the work we do, that we let all kinds of critters visit or take up residence with us. We can all live together without getting in anyone else's way. That's called commensalism. Why, skinks, snakes, opossums, rats, mice, rabbits, foxes, quail, armadillos, burrowing owls, lizards, frogs, toads, insects and spiders all find our accommodations to their liking. Some of these guys won't live anywhere else, so people started naming them after us. Gopher frogs and gopher crickets are a few.

All these animals sure are thankful we're around when a fire rages through a forest. We hide together in the burrow and can escape injury. In fact, once we're adults (about 9 inches long), we can escape most any kind of problem. Except for one. People. Yep, I hate saying it, but you folks are causing us a heap of trouble.

A long time ago, when many people were very poor, lots of gophers were eaten. In fact, we were called Roosevelt chickens. (A man named Roosevelt was president at the time.) It was called The Great Depression. Anyway, lots of folks were able to stay alive because they ate some of my ancestors. But there were a lot more of us then. People still eat us and sell us to be eaten. But buying a hamburger would be cheaper. And it wouldn't hurt our population off either. Some folks

actually put us in our homes to chase out the rattlesnakes, and that can kill everybody in the burrow. That is very sad.

But the worst problem of all is those darn apartment builders. I did it first. But they've decided our high, dry homesites are just what they want also. It wouldn't be so bad to share, except they bring in huge land moving equipment to bury us. Those that do survive then find that our home has been destroyed. We have no where to go to build new homes and we die without bringing any young tortoises into the world. We need your help to make sure people will protect us instead of harm us. We need strong laws passed so people can't collect us for eating and we need to let everyone know just how important we are to all the critters that live near us. You can visit me in the Marshroom exhibit of the Jacksonville Museum of Arts and Sciences. I'll be glad to tell you more about how you can help Gopherus polyphemus.

(For permission to reproduce this article, write Mrs. Christine Schleh, Museum Naturalist, Jacksonville Museum of Arts and Sciences, ##### ##### Drive, Jacksonville, Florida, 32207.)

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NOTICES OF BUISNESS MATTERS:

...The All Florida Herpetology Conference will be held in Miami instead of Gainesville as formerly, on Saturday, March 31, 1984 at the Cox Science Building, University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida. For information, contact Dana Krempels, Dept. of Biology, University of Miami, Coral Gables, FL 33124.

...Please be advised that the membership year of the GTC runs from January to December. It does not continue for one year after joining, but will be due again in January for the following year. Dues are: \$100.+ sustaining member, \$25. contributor, \$25. for societies, clubs or groups, \$10. regular and \$5. student, with checks made out to the Gopher Tortoise Council (deductible for tax purposes). Please check to see if you have paid.

...There are still a few GTC bumper stickers available. \$1.20 each and ordered from Ellen Nicol, Rt. # Box #####, Anthony FL 32617.

...Copies of the annual meeting proceedings are available for 1980, 1981 and 1982 (for non-members; members get them as part of membership) at a cost of \$8.00 each plus \$1.00 for

mailing. Copies of back issues of newsletters are available for 50 cents each. Order all from secretary, Ellen Nicol.

...Editors are not infallible. In last issue of TTB, this one referred to Scholarship recipient Terry Reed Osterman as Harry Osterman. My apologies.

...The treasury balance as of February 15, 1984 is \$1319.00

...The editor is ALWAYS looking for material for your newsletter. Please keep an eye open for articles or even anecdotes or other material authored by members. Surely some of you must have had interesting incidents with gopher tortoises, to relate to us.

...Remember that simple copies of TTB will be sent to anyone on request. Just send a post-card with name and address of recipient to the editor. The editor also welcomes any suggestions for improvement to or changes in the newsletter.

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A DILEMMA

It is my understanding that biologists in general and the Gopher Tortoise Council in particular frown on the keeping of tortoises as back yard pets. They are more interested in the overall preservation picture and prefer gene pools undisturbed. I am not sufficiently educated on the subject to form much of an opinion on that, but from time to time we are faced with what to do about gophers that came to us by whatever means, that in good conscience, we feel obliged to save. We find these on the roads about to be smashed or scooped up by those intent on using them for a meal. People rescue them who know property in their neighborhood is about to be bulldozed and the tortoises plowed under, burrow and all. Then they want us to take the tortoises. How can we refuse when they have gone to the trouble to remove the tortoises to safety? People who have kept them as pets for years and no longer want them turn them over to us, knowing of our interest. One Jacksonville woman had kept a gopher as a pet for 16 years and knew enough not to turn it loose after all that time in captivity. It was a fine animal, although small for its age, we set it up in a small fenced area where it dug a burrow and now lives contentedly free from the illnesses and predation it would have encountered if released in the wild.

We own ten acres of land containing native gophers, but are unable to fence it completely for financial reasons, therefore, the ten tortoises we can legally have (five per person) are in three

corrals (low open mesh fence) each about 30 feet in diameter. All have their own burrows and both sexes are represented in each corral. All is harmonious and interaction occurs as it would in the wild. We would not keep them in the corrals now that they have their established burrows, but it is quite a job to uproot the little fencing and install it somewhere else. However, if that little fence were removed, we would not be limited to keeping ten tortoises, as specified as being “penned” according to the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission.

I consulted with Game & Fish Comm. officials who told me that as long as the tortoises are penned (even for their own protection) we may not harbor more than ten at any one time. I asked what do we do if we rescued one or two more from the roads, from dogs or from people who gave them to us, and was told we would either have to relocate the new arrivals in some natural area or else release the right number of long term captives established in their burrows! All this even though our intent was to keep them safe. Made no difference. I asked about a permit to keep more than ten on this basis and was told none existed.

Friends from California stopped here en route home. With them were seven very small gopher tortoises. I was angry and promptly informed them that it was illegal to transport them over state lines. They told us that in the Ft. Myers area, property that the tortoises were living on was about to be plowed under very soon, the tortoises to be destroyed. How can one help but be sympathetic under these circumstances? I learned later that the gophers are doing very well in their California home. People have asked me to send them gophers for pets, or to locate some for them down here when they visited. I told them emphatically I did not believe in taking them from here, mainly because I know so many perish when removed. Some take them north, find that the tortoises languish or are too large, and then they want someone to take them off their hands. I know of two persons out of state who have successfully kept gophers as long term pets, but it certainly is the exception. When I lived in California and didn't know any better, a friend in Florida sent me a juvenile gopher. It never did feed and I gave it to someone in order to avoid seeing it die. After that I was bitterly opposed to transplantation of the tortoises.

Relocation of tortoises, even in Florida, is not always successful. People have given us some apparently healthy ones that have lived in burrows since they started. Then we may notice they are not appearing at the mouth of the burrow to sun or feed for some time, when others are out. That is ominous and they may or may not ever reappear. We don't know why. However, most relocated here have prospered.

In order that there may be no misunderstanding about the legality of removing tortoises from Florida, I quote directly from the proceedings of the annual meeting of the GTC in 1981:

“FLORIDA:

From Florida Wildlife Code, Title 39, effective 31 June 1982.

39-25.02 GENERAL PROVISIONS FOR TAKING, TRANSPORTING, EXHIBITING
AND SALE OF REPTILES.

(7) No person shall buy, sell, offer for sale, possess for sale, or export out of the state any gopher (*Gopherus polyphemus*), alligator snapping turtle (*Macrochelys temminckii*), Barbour’s map turtle (*Graptemys barbouri*), or Suwannee cooter (*Chrysemys concinna*), not shall any person possess more than five (5) gophers, two (2) Barbour’s map turtles or Suwannee cooters, or one (1) alligator snapping turtle unless as authorized by permit from the executive director. No person shall use the technique known as “gassing” as a method by which to induce wildlife from the burrows of the gopher tortoise. The pouring or placing of gasoline or other potentially toxic substances into the burrows of the gopher tortoise is prohibited.

(8) a) Gopher tortoises may not be taken from April 1 through June 30.”

There is more information on the gopher tortoise and other animals contained on page 20 and 21 of the annual meeting proceedings of 1981.

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DON’T KEEP SECRET THE WORK THE GOPHER TORTOISE COUNCIL IS DOING FOR
PRESERVATION OF THE GOPHER. TALK TO FRIENDS ABOUT IT, RECRUIT NEW
MEMBERS, MAKE IT A PERSONAL COMMITMENT TO DO WHAT YOU CAN TO KEEP
THIS ANCIENT CREATURE FROM GOING THE WAY OF THE DINOSAURS...!

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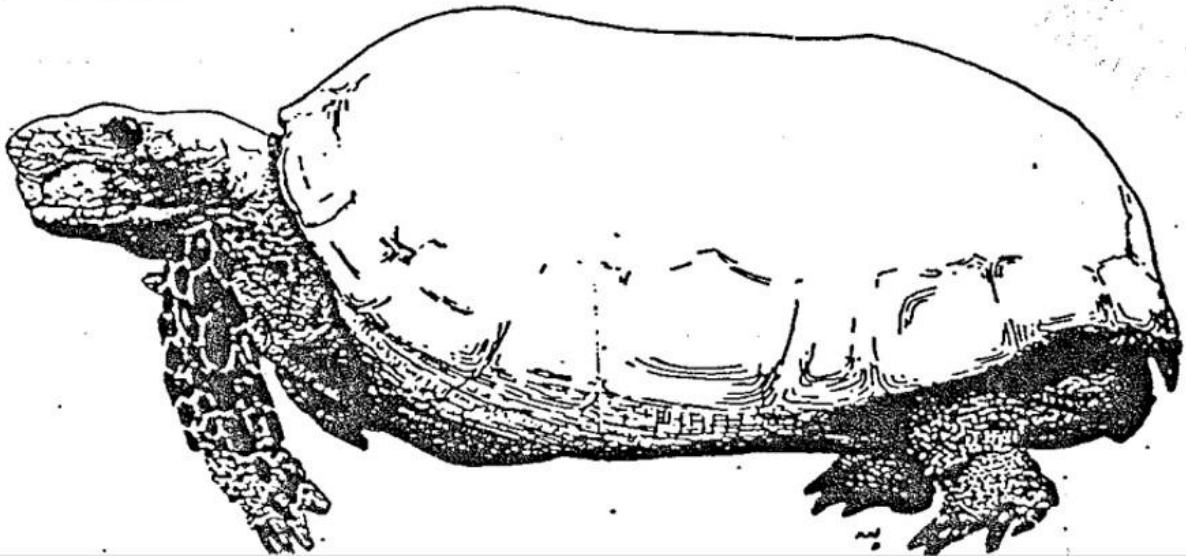


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