



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.

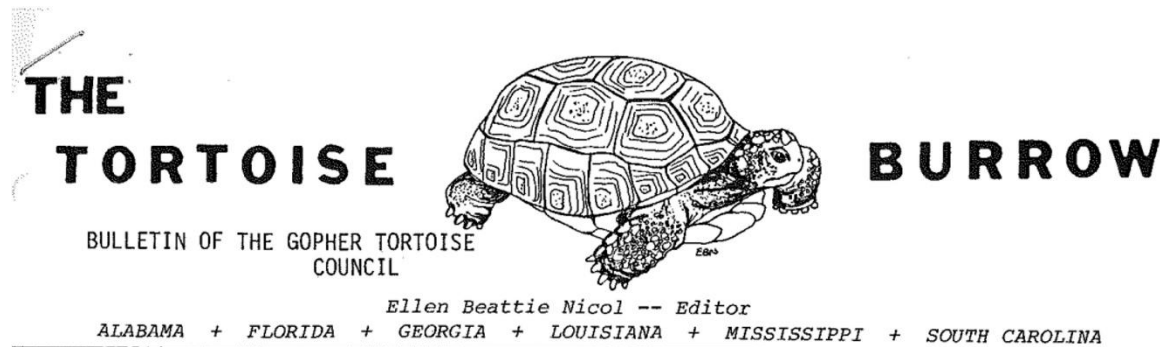


Image: Original artwork and letterhead for the newsletter of the Gopher Tortoise Council

1984 * * * * * IT'S ANNUAL MEETING TIME AGAIN * * * * * 1984

Here's the notice you have been waiting for -- time and place of the annual meeting: The meeting is to be held the weekend of November 9, 10 and 11 in Gainesville, Florida. As has been the custom, a social will be held Friday evening, with all-day presentations and discussions on Saturday, and an optional, unhurried field experience on Sunday. This is to be a tour of the nearby Swisher-Ordway Preserve (University of Florida/The Nature Conservancy) which includes extensive tortoise habitat and where Dick Franz (leader of the tour), Dr. John Eisenberg and others are currently studying gopher frogs, Florida mice, Florida pine snakes and other tortoise burrow associates. In case you had not noticed the calendar for that weekend, Monday, November 12 (Veterans Day) is a holiday for many.

Details of exactly where and when we are to meet Friday are not firm at press time, but a later bulletin will be sent to members. This is an advance notice in case you want to reserve that weekend ahead of time.

This is also a reminder that the annual meeting is dues renewal time for the Gopher Tortoise Council. An envelope is enclosed for your convenience, but you may also pay at the meeting. Dues entitle you to four issues of THE TORTOISE BURROW (newsletter) and a copy of the meeting proceedings that sells to non-members for \$8.00 plus postage -- so you're getting your money's worth at the regular membership rate of \$10.00 per year. Naturally, any contributions over that amount are highly valued. Time to produce the newsletter and the proceedings is donated, but reproduction costs are not. The cost to the GTC is considerable. On top of this is postage, which is due to increase in the coming months. It is only fair to advise that most likely if your dues are not paid or renewed, you will not continue to receive the publications except under special circumstances. Our income to operate comes only from membership fees, and we maintain only a small balance to carry us through the year of business expenses.

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PUBLIC SUPPORT NEEDED FOR "ENDANGERED" LISTING OF WESTERN GOPHER
TORTOISE POPULATIONS

By Dr. Peter C. H. Pritchard

Ren Lohofener and Lynne Lohmeier have just completed an intensive five-year study of the status of *Gopherus polyphemus* in lands west of the Tombigbee and Mobile Rivers, i.e. in Louisiana, Mississippi, and part of Alabama. Their conclusions are disheartening: the legal protection afforded the species in Mississippi and Alabama is virtually unknown to people in those states; suitable habitat has been reduced to a tiny fraction of its former area; and mortality from human predation, vehicles (on and off-road), silvi-cultural practices, and introduced predators including armadillos, fire ants, and dogs is far greater than recruitment. The survival of the species in the area is attributable to its primordial high populations and individual longevity, but today in many areas surviving adults may be so isolated that they are unlikely ever to encounter other adult individuals of the opposite sex. For such reasons, it is concluded that the species is functionally extinct in Louisiana, and may soon become so in Mississippi. In Mississippi and western Alabama, the only federal land that has gopher tortoises is the DeSoto National Forest. However, current forest management takes no account of the need for gopher tortoise conservation, and an estimated 4.8 per cent of the adult tortoise population in the forest is lost to direct human take each year, not including other mortality from on and off-road vehicular encounters.

While listing of these populations as endangered will not in itself reverse their stresses and downward trends, it will definitely help. Readers of THE TORTOISE BURROW are urged

to support Lohoefer and Lohmeier's petition that *Gopherus polyphemus* is endangered west of the Tombigbee and Mobile Rivers by writing, in their own words, to: Mr. Robert Jantzen, Director, USFWS, Department of the Interior, Washington, DC 20240. Readers requiring further information or copies of the petition may write to: Ren Lohoefer, Research Associate, Mississippi State University Research Center, National Space Technology Laboratories, Mississippi 39529 (That's NSTL, MS 39529 for addressing)

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GEORGIA NEWS: NON-GAME CONSERVATION COALITION

Report by: Dr. Harold Wahlquist

A renewed effort is underway to enact legislation to provide funding for non-game wildlife in Georgia. Many of you no doubt remember the big push before the 1983 General Assembly Session in support of an income tax checkoff for non-game. Under the program, the Georgia income tax form would provide a checkoff box for anyone who wants to contribute to help non-game species. The checkoff is strictly voluntary and would not cost the state any tax dollars. Immediately before the 1983 session, the governor and the Department of Natural Resources withdrew their support for the checkoff because they were told by the Revenue Department that it would be too costly to initiate. However, this has not been the case in other states that have enacted this legislation. Currently 31 states have an income tax checkoff for non-game programs and they are enjoying success from this method of raising funds.

Non-game species include all flora and fauna that are not legally hunted and fished. Of the over 1130 species in Georgia, over 90 per cent are non-game; but at the present no state money is available to specifically manage these species. The funds from the non-game checkoff would be used to support the programs and research of the non-game division of DNR, including support for endangered species and acquisition of habitat. As the population of Georgia continues to grow, the pressures on the wildlife species and their habitats will increase. A strong, viable non-game program is essential for our state.

The Non-game Conservation Coalition has been formed to gather support for this legislation. At the present time, the Coalition is recruiting members, raising funds and undertaking an effort to gain the support of Governor Joe Frank Harris and the State Legislature for the checkoff bill. The governor has indicated that he will take another look at the idea of an income tax checkoff for non-game, and has suggested that the Coalition undertake an effort to

educate the legislators regarding this proposal. You can lend your support by writing to Governor Harris, State Capitol, Atlanta, GA 30334, and also to your state senator and representative urging their support. Also, if the opportunity presents itself, question the candidates for the State Legislature regarding this issue. The more times our government officials hear about the need for non-game wildlife protection and the checkoff bill, the better are the chances of their support.

Ed. Note: Dr. Dale R. Jackson, Co-chairman of the GTC advises that a contribution to the Coalition of \$25.00 has been authorized.

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GOPHER TORTOISE LIFE THREATENED

Gainesville, Fla. (AP) -- Two zoologists have rigged up five gopher tortoises with radio transmitters to study the living habits of the timid vegetarians and see if they can be moved to less-predatory environments. The University of Florida researchers are studying how the gopher tortoises, so-called because they live in holes in the ground, survive on such low levels of oxygen and tolerate such high levels of carbon dioxide in their burrows, which can be up to 18 feet long.

"In my opinion, they are threatened and fast disappearing," said Gordon Ultsch, a UF adjunct professor of zoology. "I would say their population is 25 per cent of what it once was."

Gopher tortoises are officially listed by the state as a species of "special concern" -- a designation not as powerful as "threatened" or "endangered." But Ultsch and John F. Anderson, another UF zoology professor, say the elusive critters are facing a double threat from man -- their habitats are being turned into cities and they are being hunted for their meat. In addition, the species doesn't reproduce until the tortoises are between 16 and 18 years old -- a long time to dodge encroaching predators, said Joan Diemer, a wildlife biologist with the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission.

In order to track the tortoises, which weigh up to 12 pounds with shells that can reach 14 inches in length, the two researchers outfitted the five turtles at a preserve 20 miles east of here with radio transmitters about the size of ice cubes. Once they find a tortoise in his lair, they measure the levels of oxygen and carbon dioxide. The two researchers have found that the carbon dioxide levels in tortoise holes is 30 to 200 times greater than in the air.

"Basically the problem is trying to understand how they survive in their particular environment," said Anderson. The information Ultsch and Anderson gather could be valuable in determining whether gopher tortoises, whose habitats are being taken over by development, can be safely moved.

"Both gopher tortoises and humans want to live in Florida's high and dry places, and those are running out," said Ms. Diemer, who has been studying the animals for the last three years. The five factors that most threaten the gopher tortoise are urbanization, agriculture, certain forestry practices, phosphate mining, and hunting, she said.

The tortoises are thought to lay only about six eggs. Of those six, only a few survive. "When those little guys hatch out, they are tasty morsels for everything from raccoons to stray dogs," Ms. Diemer said.

The season for capturing gopher tortoises has been shortened from nine months to six months. It runs from July 1 to Jan. 1, and hunters are allowed to have only five tortoises in possession at any one time. It is illegal to flush tortoises out of their burrows with gasoline. Using guns, snares and bucket traps is also illegal. "I think they should stop hunting them," said Ultsch. "When we're not out here on the preserve, I would say that about half of the tortoise burrows we find are empty, and some show evidence that the tortoises were removed by snares," Anderson added.

Ms. Diemer, who as part of her research has interviewed hunters, said she thinks the practice of eating tortoises is done mostly out of tradition now. "Many a family lived off of gophers during the Depression years," she said. "And now eating them is a tradition tied in with church suppers and that sort of thing. Whereas many people have chicken and dumplings, these people are used to having gopher and dumplings."

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HERE WE GO AGAIN ---

By: Dr. Peter C. H. Pritchard
Co-chairman, GTC

Just as we were getting used to the generic name *Scaptochelys* for the desert and Texas tortoises, word is received that we should include these two species in *Xerobates*, not in

Scaptochelys. Non-taxonomists may find these changes unforgivable, but there are reasons why they should be made. A chronological sequence of relevant publications is as follows:

1801. F.M. Daudin describes the Florida gopher as *Testudo polyphemus*.
1832. C. Rafinesque proposes the new generic name *Gopherus* for *polyphemus*, but in an obscure journal and without adequate justification.
1857. L. Agassiz describes the genus *Xerobates* in which he includes the species *X. berlandieri* as well as a species confusingly called *X. carolinus* but which, from the description, is clearly the Florida gopher, *Gopherus polyphemus*.
1863. J. G. Cooper describes *Xerobates agassizii*, the Desert Tortoise.
1908. A.E. Brown selects *berlandieri* as the type species of *Xerobates*.
1929. W. Lindholm selects *carolinus* (= *Testudo polyphemus* Daudin) as the type species of *Xerobates*, ignoring Brown's earlier selection of *berlandieri* as the type species.
1982. D. Bramble observes that, on anatomical grounds, the genus *Gopherus* should be divided, with *Gopherus* itself retained for the two species with specialized cervical and forelimb structure (i.e. *polyphemus* and *flavomarginatus*), and with the other, less specialized species (*agassizii* and *berlandieri*) included in a new genus *Scaptochelys*. Bramble accepted Lindholm's selection of *carolinus* (= *polyphemus*) as the type species of *Xerobates*, which would make this name unavailable for *agassizii* and *berlandieri*.
1984. R. Bour observed that the type of *Xerobates* had been established as *berlandieri* by Brown and therefore, this name should replace *Scaptochelys*.

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From the Grass roots

COMMUNAL LIFE OF THE GOPHER

By Ellen Nicol

Anyone who has kept adult male gopher tortoises may have seen the interaction between them when apparently fighting over a female, or a territory, or whatever else a pair of male gophers might quarrel over. One rainy afternoon, I spotted two males in the yard, gular to gular, and heard them crashing into each other headon. This I had to investigate further.

I approached within a few feet of them, and they were oblivious to my presence. They jostled each other, evenly matched. One would charge, the other retreat a few inches, and then the advantage was reversed. One finally caught the other off guard and flipped him on his back. The overturned one waved his legs in the air, attempting to right himself, while the "victor" stood and watched just inches away.

Then I was privileged to witness one more vignette of tortoise "intelligence", as the upright male deliberately walked over and with a quick motion, flipped the vanquished tortoise right side up. I couldn't believe what I had seen. They continued sparring as if nothing had happened, but with a few minutes each began grazing quietly with their backs to each other as if having established some superiority, there was no further need to fight. Since that incident, I have watched the tortoises do this quite often, sometimes dueling for long periods. Usually when one has been overturned, the victor rams the loser back right side up and they continue to fight. They use their strong front legs as weapons, scraping the cavity between the head and legs into white patches of torn skin caused by contact with the claws. I am not able to determine if it is always the same males fighting.

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WE DID IT, WE DID IT!

(More by:) Ellen Nicol

My husband, Bob, came charging in the door calling, "We did it, we did it!" I was about 95% sure that this meant something had hatched. But what? In his hand he carried three tiny sand-caked gopher tortoise. We didn't even know a female had nested. We went out in search of other hatchlings, as they could escape thru the 1 x 2 inch enclosure screen. Two he had found in the slope of a burrow, and the other he spotted about six feet away, nibbling on grass. Bob dug at a likely-looking "hole" about 12 inches down in the burrow and off to one side. About 7 inches down, he located soft eggshells. This meant they were probably newly hatched, before the shells had dried and shriveled. As he was digging and we were head-to-head over the burrow mouth, a

fourth baby trundled up from the depths of the burrow, its plastron still in the folded position and with a large umbilical scar. On the other three, the scar was almost fully healed. All still had the caruncle.

We wondered what to do with the babies for the winter, finally deciding they would be best off returned to their yard where they would hibernate. Bob made a four foot square enclosure of hardware cloth, depressed in the ground and with a screen cover to prevent birds. from carrying off the babies. As opposed to the dark color of adults, these babies are almost a solid lemon yellow with only dark markings along the carapacial seams. It will be fun to greet them in the spring when they emerge.

In thinking back, I did have to wonder if Bob felt “we did it”. I suppose it is because we had the satisfaction of knowing we were instrumental in providing conditions conducive to reproduction. We must be doing SOMETHING right....

*see final page

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AND YET ANOTHER THREAT

By Dr. Dale R. Jackson
Co-Chairman, GTC.

Recently, while identifying the remains of freshwater turtles eaten by alligators harvested during the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission’s experimental hunts in Alachua County, Florida, I was more than a little surprised to find four scutes from an unfortunate hopper tortoise that must have wandered too near the lake. The tortoise, which I estimated to have had a plastral length of about 14 cm, had been consumed by a 92 inch male gator! As if our poor gopher friends don’t have enough to worry about already....!

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How about it, readers? Do you have a story or two to send to the editor for the Grass Roots column? I’d sure appreciate it. Next issue we will have the meeting report and an article on tick infestation, but I need more gopher stories from you members.

GTC ITEMS AVAILABLE

Our membership is not large, but it covers the six southeastern states of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina. We also have members sympathetic to the cause in other states, who are interested in the future and survival of *Gopherus polyphemus*. We'd be delighted to have more members. Please remember that Ellen Nicol is always pleased to send complementary copies to anyone interested -- just send the name on the postcard.

To new members, a few back issues of TTB are available (#7 thru #11) at 50 cents per copy. Proceedings of the 1983 meeting in Valdosta will be sent to paid members or can be collected at the Gainesville meeting. For non-members or new members desiring proceedings from the 1981 and 1982 meeting, they are available at \$8.00 per copy plus \$1.00 postage. They may also be purchased at the meeting.

Attractive, good quality plastic bumper stickers in green, gold and white will be for sale at the meeting or may be ordered thru the mail, at \$2.00 each.

PLEASE NOTE that all communication for TTB, the editor or secretary should come to the Anothony address below. Do not send material to Florida State Museum, other than for Dick Franz personally. FSM remains the official headquarters of the Gopher Tortoise Council, but time is saved by sending publications and other material to the editor directly. The phone number is (###) ###-####, and calling after 11 PM is okay.

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* About a week after the original four baby gophers were found, a fifth hatchling was seen in the high grass around the enclosure. There is no way to be sure if it is from the same clutch, but we assume it is. It has joined the other four in the small enclosure. Some have started tiny burrows and we look forward to seeing if they made it thru the winter. The setting is natural, so there is no good reason why they should not survive. At least they are free from predator dangers.

SEE Y'ALL AT THE MEETING IN NOVEMBER.LET's GOPHER IT!

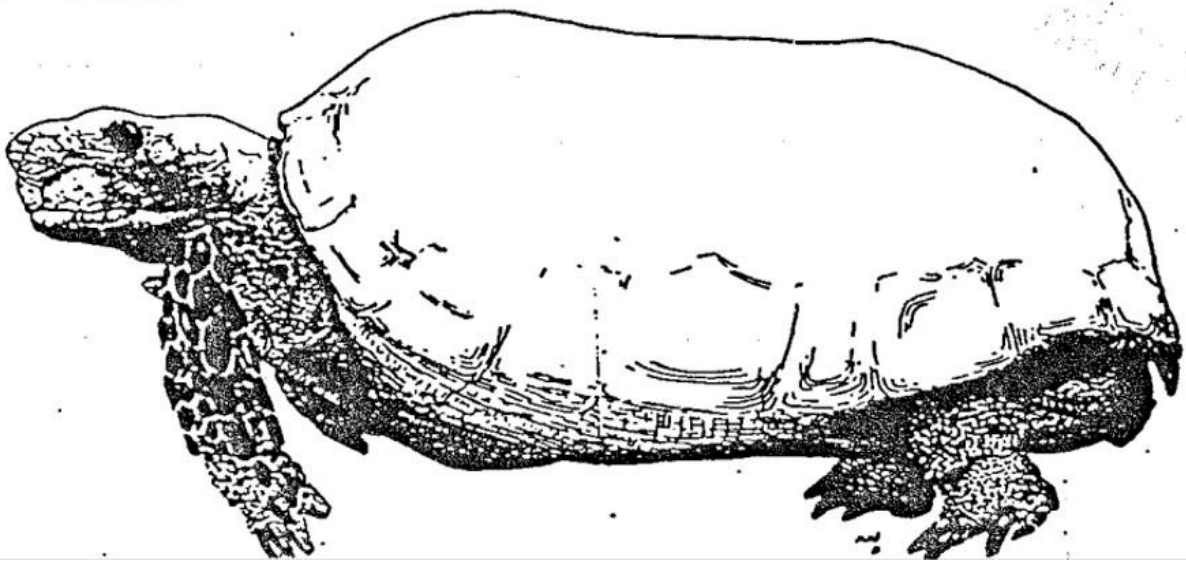


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