



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.

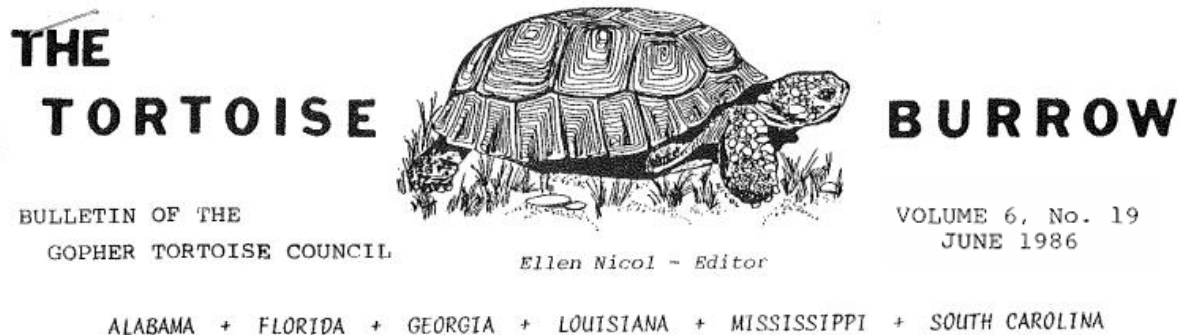


Image: Original artwork and letterhead for the newsletter of the Gopher Tortoise Council

FLORIDA'S NATIONAL FORESTS TO PROTECT TORTOISES

A major victory for the gopher tortoise was struck when the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission recently approved a total ban on harvest of tortoises in the state's three major national forests (aka wildlife management areas). The Ocala National Forest, a mixture of scrub and sandhill habitats, includes extensive tortoise habitat, although past harvesting has depleted local tortoise populations. The Apalachicola National Forest in the panhandle contains significant amounts of potential tortoise habitat, although past harvest of tortoises and conversion of longleaf pine to slash pine have reduced populations there. The Osceola National Forest, characterized by low, wet flatwoods, provides limited habitat for its relatively small population of tortoises. With proper management, the nearly 1.1 million acres of U.S. Forest land in Florida can go a long way toward securing the future for the gopher tortoise and its associated fauna. Recognition by the U.S. Forest Service of the gopher tortoise as one of the ten "Management Indicator Species," as well as intentions of reconverting some off-site slash pine to longleaf pine, may favor recovery of the Forests' somewhat depleted tortoise populations.

The U.S. Forest Service and Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission are to be commended for passage of this regulation, which takes effect on July 1. GTC members should publicize this new regulation and urge strict enforcement by USFS and FGFWFC officials.

Dale Jackson

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NEW REGULATIONS FOR FLORIDA REPTILES

In addition to prohibiting the harvest of tortoises in the state's national forests, the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission recently approved stricter regulations concerning the sale and possession of three other Florida reptiles – the Florida box turtle (*Terrapene Carolina bauri*), the Gulf Coast box turtle (*T. c. major*), and the Florida pine snake (*Pituophis melanoleucas mugitus*). Sale of all three reptiles is not prohibited, and personal possession is now limited to two (2) of each turtle and one (1) pine snake.

Dale Jackson

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URBAN GROWTH THREATENS HABITAT OF PINE SNAKE

GAINESVILLE (AP) – The Florida pine snake, a constrictor that chokes its victims to death with powerful coils, is being squeezed out of its own habitat by an even more aggressive competitor—urban development, researchers say. According to a University of Florida herpetologist, the development of Florida's previously undisturbed sandhills may prove perilous to the harmless, non-poisonous snake, which is already listed as a Species of Special Concern. "Twenty years ago, no one in his right mind would think about living in these upland sandhills," said Dick Franz, a researcher at UF's Florida State Museum. "But now much of the waterfront land and other prime sites have been developed." Another danger facing the pine snakes is the general dislike people have for reptiles, Franz noted. Urban growth means more people will encounter pine snakes, and likely kill the harmless creatures.

Please note IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT ON ANNUAL MEETING Please note

For those who plan to attend the 1986 GTC meeting, but do not wish to stay at the Youth Camp (separate quarters for men and women), at Wekiwa Springs State Park, here is more information:

There are 60 campsites in the family camping area of Wekiwa. Thirty sites are available on a reservation basis; the other 30 are available on a first-come, first-served basis. Camping fees of \$1.00 per person is charged, up to a maximum of eight campers. If electricity is used, \$2.00/campsite/night is charged. All fees are taxable.

Reservations must be made BY TELEPHONE within the 60-day period preceding the check-in date. Calls must be made between 8 AM and 5 PM. EDT.* Collect calls or reservation requests made by mail or through the Tallahassee office will NOT be accepted. Reservations will not be held after 5 PM unless the park is notified by phone ON THE CHECK-IN DATE, of a late arrival. Plan to arrive at the park before sundown (5:30 to 6:00 PM in November). To make your reservation for the GTC meeting, call (###) ###-#### on or after 9 September 1986.

*Or EST.

MORE INFORMATION:

The camping period may not exceed 14 days. The park opens at 8 AM and closes at sundown. However, gate keys are issued (for a returnable deposit) for after-hour use. Check-out time is 2 PM. Overnight camping areas are provided with tables, grills and fully-equipped rest rooms. NO PETS ALLOWED. The following (maximum) combinations of vehicles/tents are allowed on each site: 1 recreational vehicle and 1 tent OR 2 cars and 2 tents. The Youth Camp will cost GTC members \$3.00/person/night; meals will be extra. Watch the September TTB for menu and meal details.

Terry Linley
GTC Co-Chairman

The MARCH TTB contained a list of Florida area telephone numbers for the purpose of reporting wildlife violations. Member Harry Pawelczyk advises that in MISSISSIPPI, the number is #-###-##-##### or #-###-###-#####. This is a statewide toll-free number where game violations can be reported. The violation is then radioed down to the local area conservation officers for fast action. Any other states want to be listed...?

NEW PUBLICATION ON ALAMABAMA WILDLIFE

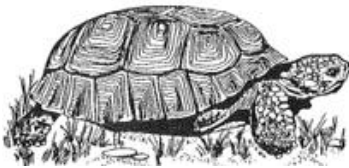
Recently published is the second book resulting from “Alabama’s First Nongame Wildlife Conference.” The 124-page book, “Vertebrate Animals of Alabama in Need of Special Attention,” covers 105 species and subspecies categorized by authorities to be “endangered,” “threatened,” “special concern,” or “poorly known” in Alabama.

Each account contains a description of the animal, its range, and its habitat. Information on life history and ecology is included, as is a statement on the basis for classification. Almost all forms are depicted in color, and range maps are included for most.

The gopher tortoise is categorized as “threatened” in Alabama, as is the Florida pine snake, black pine snake, and gopher frog.

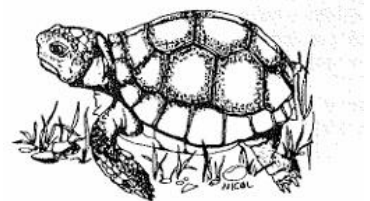
Twenty-eight zoologists were involved in writing the accounts, including Dale Jackson, Bruce Means, Dan Speake, George Folkerts, Ralph Jordan, and Bob Mount – all G.T.C. members. Mount served as editor.

The publication sells for \$12.00 (plus 6% sales tax for Alabama residents), postpaid, and is available from the Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station, Auburn Univ., AL 36849.



POSTCARDS AVAILABLE

(designs at left & right). 6 for \$1.00 if mailed; 8 for \$1.00 when no mailing required. Tan card stock, black ink. #1 on left, #2 on right (hatchling). Proceeds to GTC. Order from E. Nicol, address below.



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

1984 PROCEEDINGS AVAILABILITY

Proceedings of the 1984 GTC meeting (Gainesville, FL) are nearly completed and ready for binding. We expect to mail them in June, so be looking for your copy. If you did not attend the 1984 meeting or were not a member for 1984, you may wish to reserve a copy now by mailing \$8.00 to Ellen Nicol (check made out to GTC). A few Proceedings from four previous meetings are available at \$8.00 each copy.

Dale Jackson

STUDENT AWARD 1985-86

Brent Palmer has applied for the student award (\$250.00). He is at the Department of Zoology, University of Florida in Gainesville, and his thesis research is on "Uterine Morphology During the Reproductive Cycle of the Gopher Tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*).

NEW CONTRIBUTING MEMBERS, SINCE MARCH 1986

Archbold Biological Station – FL
Benfield, K. – FL
Congro, V. – NY
Orlando Herp. Club – FL

Osthoff, I. – MO
Rattlesnake & Gopher Enthusiasts – FL
White, C. – MD

GTC MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION:

\$100. +	Sustaining Member
25.	Contributor
25.	Societies, Clubs, Groups
10.	Regular
5.	Student

Please make check out to GOPHER TORTOISE COUNCIL, and mail to Ellen Nicol, Secretary,
Rt. #, Box #####, Anthony, FL 32617 (###) ###-####

THE ENDANGERED GOPHER

By Joan E. Diemer

“You know, M’am, the gopher hasn’t had many friends till now.” So began my interview with a retired Florida wildlife officer who recounted talks of tortoises being exterminated by farmers and cattlemen in formerly rural Duval County.

This historical perspective on the gopher tortoise was solicited in conjunction with an ongoing study by the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission. Certainly the interest in and concern for this beleaguered species has greatly increased in the past decade. Appreciating this concern requires some knowledge of tortoise status, ecology, and reproduction.

One of four North American tortoise species, the gopher tortoise (scientific name: *Gopherus polyphemus*) occurs in the Coastal Plain from extreme eastern Louisiana to southern South Carolina. Known by rural Southerners simply as “the gopher,” this terrestrial turtle is not to be confused with the pocket gopher, a burrowing rodent (known locally as “the salamander” and not to be confused with the amphibian of the same name).

Lacking the webbed feet of the aquatic turtles and the hinged shell of the common box turtle, the gopher tortoise is characterized by stumpy elephantine hind feet and flattened shovel-like forelimbs adapted to digging. The gopher tortoise’s shell is domed and averages about 10 inches in length. Coloration is generally tan, brown or gray.

The current stronghold of the gopher tortoise is Florida and south Georgia. In Florida, tortoises still occur in portions of all 67 counties; however, their distribution in extreme southern Florida is limited by unsuitable habitat. The southern-most population of gopher tortoises occurs in Cape Sable, at the tip of the Florida peninsula. Unfortunately, the wide distribution belies the species’ true status. Many gopher tortoise populations are declining as a result of habitat destruction and human predation.

Gopher tortoise habitat has been plowed under, chopped up, scooped out, paved over by farmers, foresters, miners and developers respectfully. Exploited for more than 4000 years in Florida, the gopher tortoise was a major food source for many families during the Depression, as

reflected in the name “Hoover chicken.” Tortoise populations in parts of the Florida Panhandle appear to be greatly depleted as a result of long-term heavy human exploitation. Some Panhandle tortoise hunters now travel to the northern Florida peninsula to obtain their traditional tablefare.

The legal status of the species varies among the six states in which it occurs. In Florida, the gopher tortoise is considered a species of special concern. Specific regulations prohibit commercial sale and the use of firearms, snares, and bucket traps for capturing tortoises. The pouring or placing of gasoline or other toxic substances in gopher tortoise burrows is also prohibited. Recent changes in the State’s tortoise harvest regulations have resulted in a reduced possession limit (from 5 to 2) and season (from 6 to 3 months).

As of July 1, 1985, the gopher tortoise may only be taken from October 1 to January 1. Tortoises may not be taken south of a line extending along State Road 72 to Arcadia and State Road 70 to Ft. Pierce. In 1985, the U.S. Air Force prohibited the taking of tortoises on the vast Eglin Reservation in west Florida. Additionally, the U.S. Forest Service has proposed a ban (now in effect. Ed.) on tortoise harvest in Florida’s three national forests: the Ocala, Osceola, and Apalachicola.

The gopher tortoise is generally associated with dry uplands. The dryness of these areas is not a reflection of insufficient rainfall or humidity, but instead derives from the deep sandy soils. Known as sandhills, these habitats are primarily characterized as longleaf pine, turkey oak and wiregrass. In Florida, gopher tortoises may also be found in sand pine scrub habitat, vegetated beach dunes, dry live oak hammocks, and the drier portions of pine flatwoods and prairies.

Three environmental conditions are especially important to gopher tortoises: well-drained loose soil in which to burrow, adequate low growing plants for food, and open sunlit sites for nesting. The gopher tortoise’s half-moon shaped burrow, with its accompanying mound of sand, is a conspicuous feature of the north Florida sandy lands. The burrow averages 14 feet in length, 6 feet in depth, and is wide enough to turn around at any point.

This subterranean tunnel protects the tortoise from temperature extremes, moisture loss, and predators and serves as a refuge for a variety of animals. Skunks, opossums, foxes, rabbits, armadillos, quail, and burrowing owls visit gopher tortoise burrows. Various species of snakes, lizards, frogs, toads, spiders, ticks, and flies also utilize the burrow. Certain insect species, such as the gopher cricket, are found only in tortoise burrows, and therefore known as “obligates.”

The tortoise burrow is also important to several protected species such as the federally-threatened eastern indigo snake and the state-listed Florida mouse, pine snake, and gopher frog.

In addition to its role as the sandhill's principal landlord, the gopher tortoise returns nutrients to the surface when it excavates its deep burrows. As it grazes along feeding paths that radiate out from the burrow, the tortoise also serves as a seed dispersal agent for native plants. Favored foods are tender broad-leaf grasses and legumes, although wiregrass is also consumed. Fruits, such as blackberries, pawpaws, gopher apples, and saw palmetto berries also serve as tortoise food items.

The gopher tortoise is an extremely slow-growing, long-lived reptile. In northern Florida, female tortoises first breed at approximately 10-15 years of age (or about 9 inches shell length) and produce a single annual clutch of approximately six eggs.

Nests are generally constructed in the burrow mounds from mid-May to mid-June; the incubation period at this latitude is approximately 80-90 days.

The first three years of life are the most critical for the gopher tortoise. Once the juvenile tortoises are able to dig deep enough to escape most predators, only dogs and man threaten their continued survival. Maximum life expectancy for a gopher tortoise is approximately 40-60 years.

Important conservation measures for the gopher tortoise include habitat management, public education, establishment of preserves, and protection from over harvest. Gopher tortoise densities are highest in open savannas. To promote these optimal conditions, prescribed fires is the recommended management tool.

Since 1978, the Gopher Tortoise Council, a group of concerned scientists and lay persons, has been promoting increased public awareness and active management of the species. Today, the timid tortoise enjoys many friends, yet faces an uncertain future.

During hard times in this century, the gopher tortoise contributed to human survival. We humans should pay back that debt by assuring the tortoise's survival into the next century.

(Editor's Note: In its efforts to protect the gopher, the Gopher Tortoise Council needs your help. To join the Council, write Ellen Nicol, Secretary, Gopher Tortoise Council, Rt. #, Box #####, Anthony, FL 32617.)

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The author, Joan E. Diemer, is wildlife biologist for the State of Florida.

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Is it educational or a sideshow?
(copy of news article)

By GRAHAM HEATH
Press Register Reporter

Is the Gulf States Rattlesnake Festival an educational experience or a "sideshow" which is destroying endangered animals?

Biologists and conservation officials say the use of gasoline to round up rattlesnakes for the event is threatening some endangered species of animals, while organizers of the event say they followed proper procedures in gathering the snakes.

During the festival, gasoline was used to force hibernating rattlesnakes from gopher tortoise burrows for use at the festival last weekend. Conservation officials say the gassing harms several of the more than 30 vertebrate species which use the burrows – including animals on the federal endangered species list.

FESTIVAL organizers counter that the gassing doesn't harm animals hibernating or retreating in the burrows.

"We are concerned about the amount of gas used," says Scott Wilson, chairman of the board of the Mobile Jaycees, who co-sponsored the event along with the Mobile county Sheriff's Auxiliary. He adds that a small amount of gas was used. "Pro hunters assure us that it doesn't bother any other animals in the whole," says Wilson. Most of the snakes, he says, were brought in from Texas.

However, Joe Meyers, coordinator of Non-Game Wildlife for the Game and Fish Division of the Alabama Department of Conservation, says no studies have been performed stating that small amounts of gas are not harmful.

"They (organizers) talked to the wrong people," Meyers says. "If it accomplishes the point of putting the snake out of the burrow, it would have to harm the snake."

THE SHERIFF'S Department Auxiliary refused comment on the matter. However a spokesman for the Sheriff's Department says the Auxiliary was "officially" in charge of the event.

Bob Mount, professor of zoology-entomology at Auburn University, says studies show that one-half of the rattlesnakes confronted with the gas dies in the burrows and that rattlesnake bounties encourage some hunters to use excessive amounts of ga. The festival offered bounties up to \$150.

"It's a shame the people of Mobile decided to have a rodeo," Mount says.

Organizers say the festival offers information on snake bites, removing venom and rattlesnake folklore.

"There is no justification for the roundup," according to Steve Carey, a Mobile College biologist. "It's a sideshow type of thing. It titillates the audience when snakes strike (at the snake expert) while he walks about the den."

CAREY SAYS the rodeo should involve the cottonmouth moccasin, which is abundant in the Mobile area. "The focus is on the eastern diamondback because its size and rattles make for a good show," Carey says. "The eastern diamondback is listed as a 'special concern' on the state list of woldlife animals."

Dave Nelson, an associate professor of biology at the University of South Alabama, says he is planning to present a resolution in March to the Academy of Science – a statewide organization based in Birmingham – opposing the gassing of burrows.

(Above sent to editor by member John Marshall)

Ran 2/27/86 in Mobile (AL) Press Register

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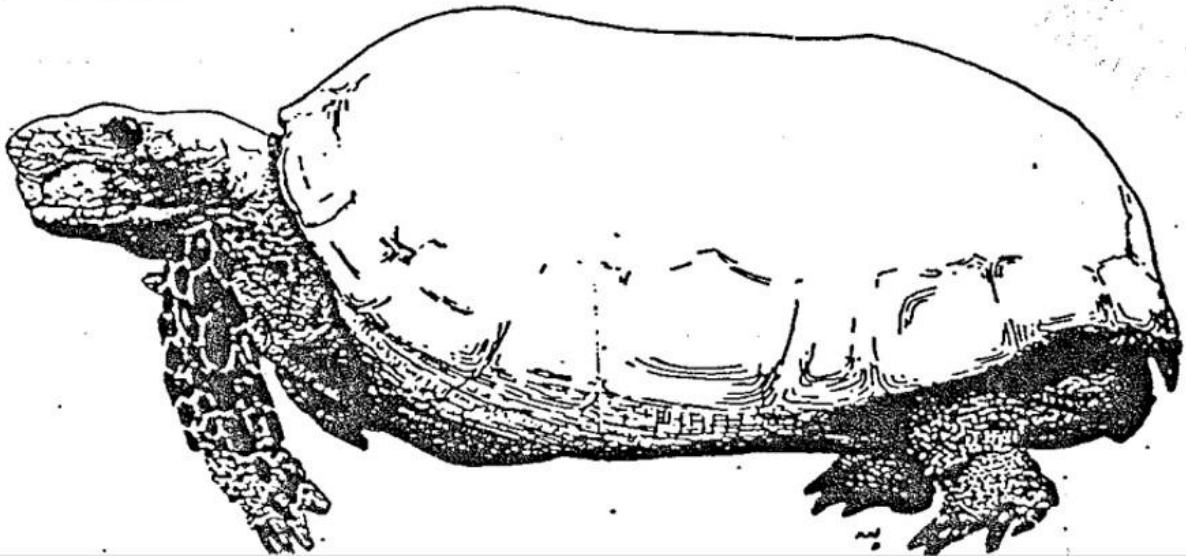


Image: Original artwork for the newsletter of the Gopher Tortoise Council.

This document was created and transcribed by Caitlin Jones
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