

GOPHER TORTOISE

Gopherus polyphemus

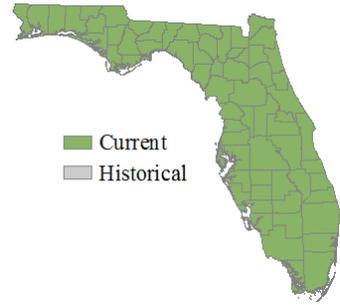
Order: Cryptodeira

Family: Testudinidae

FNAI Ranks: G3/S3

U.S. Status: Candidate

FL Status: Threatened



Description: A medium-sized turtle (to 10 in. = 254 mm) fully adapted for life on land. Upper shell brown and relatively flat above; lower shell yellowish, without hinge, and projecting forward, especially in male; skin brown to dark gray. Forelimbs greatly expanded for digging; hind limbs reduced, stumpy, lacking any form of webbing between toes. Lower shell of male somewhat concave. Young: scales of carapace often with yellow centers, skin yellowish to tan; approximately 2 in. (51 mm) shell length at hatching.

Similar Species: The only other native land turtle in Florida, the box turtle (*Terrapene carolina*), is distinguished by its smaller size (to 8 in. = 203 mm), less stout feet, moveable hinge on lower shell, and often but not always by black and yellow upper shell. Tortoise burrows, which are useful in determining species' presence, typically have lower, flatter profile than more rounded burrows of armadillos; this reflects differences in cross-sectional shapes of the two animals.

Habitat: Typically found in dry upland habitats, including sandhills, scrub, xeric oak hammock, and dry pine flatwoods; also commonly uses disturbed habitats such as pastures, oldfields, and road shoulders. Tortoises excavate deep burrows for refuge from predators, weather, and fire; more than 300 other species of animals have been recorded sharing these burrows.

Seasonal Occurrence: Above-ground activity is greatly reduced during cold weather, with tortoises in northern Florida remaining below ground for months. Nonetheless, burrows are relatively conspicuous year-round.

Florida Distribution: Statewide range that extends as far south as Cape Sable. Many of the best populations are in the northern half of the peninsula and parts of the Panhandle, with generally lower numbers in the southern half of the peninsula.

Range-wide Distribution: Lower Southeastern Coastal Plain, extending from southern South Carolina southward through lower Georgia and Florida and westward through southern Alabama, Mississippi, and extreme southeastern Louisiana.

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Conservation Status: Despite its widespread occurrence throughout Florida, there is considerable concern about the declining abundance of this species. Much of its native habitat has been lost to agriculture, citriculture, forestry, mining, and urban and residential development. Although protected populations occur on many state, federal, and private conservation lands, recent development of a severe respiratory disease threatens even those.

Protection and Management: Habitat management typically entails such tools as thinning of dense hardwood stands and use of fire to maintain open areas. Goals are to maintain relatively open understory and midstory layers and a lush herbaceous groundcover. In general, conservation lands with viable tortoise populations should not accept formerly captive animals because of the risk of introducing disease.

References:



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juvenile © Dan Hipes

Gopher Tortoise



adult © Rebecca Zeroth

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