Gopher Tortoise Information

Description: The gopher tortoise is a large brown tortoise whose shell can grow to 15” (38 cm) in length. It weighs between 9-11pounds (4-5 kg). The front legs are broad and flat, almost like a shovel and the back legs look like mini elephant legs.

Habitat: The gopher tortoise most often lives in well-drained sandy soil. It lives in burrows that it excavates by scooping out sand with its legs. At Barefoot Beach the burrows range from 6’ (15 cm)-20’ (6 m). There are left or right handed burrows that may zig zag to a depth from 3-20’ (.9-6m). These burrows provide protection from predators and the elements. They also provide homes for animals such as snakes, mice, opossums, rabbits, armadillos, lizards, and invertebrates.

Diet: The gopher tortoise is primarily an herbivore and it feeds on over 300 different low growing plants. The gopher tortoise has no teeth but its bony beak cuts like scissors. The largest part of its diet consists of grasses and legumes. A gopher tortoise mainly gets water from the plants that it eats. During rain storms, it has been known to channel rain water at its burrow and drink.

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Reproduction: A gopher tortoise reaches sexual maturity between 12-15 years of age when its shell is about 9" (23 cm) long. A gopher tortoise has an elaborate courtship that begins in the spring. Head bobbing and neck tickling are part of the ritual. Typically a nest is dug close to the burrow opening where a clutch of 4-7 eggs are laid and covered by dirt, usually in May or June. The eggs are about the size of a ping pong ball. If the temperature of the sand or dirt where the nest is incubating is above 85 degrees, the tortoise hatchlings will be females. Temperatures below 85 degrees produce males. After about 80-90 days, the young hatch. The yellow-brown hatchlings are 1-2" (2.5-5 cm) long and grow about ¾" (I.9 cm) per year.

Hatchling

Longevity: A gopher tortoise may live 60 years in the wild.

How you can help: In Florida, the gopher tortoise is listed as a threatened species. Both the tortoise and its burrow are protected by law.

The gopher tortoise population is falling primarily due to habitat loss. You can help by preserving the upland habitat of the gopher tortoise. By staying on boardwalks and trails, you are preserving its habitat.

Sometimes a gopher tortoise crosses a busy road. If it is safe to do so, you may help by carrying it across the road in the direction it was travelling. Grip the gopher tortoise in the middle of its carapace (shell) or its strong nails may scratch you.

Never remove a gopher tortoise out of its habitat. It only takes one sick tortoise to infect an entire population of healthy tortoises.

PLEASE LOOK UNDER YOUR CAR FOR A GOPHER TORTOISE BEFORE BACKING OUT OF YOUR PARKING SPACE.

DRIVE WATCHFULLY.

PLEASE LEAVE YOUR CELL PHONE OFF WHILE YOU ARE DRIVING IN OR OUT OF THE PARK.

THANK YOU!

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