



Gopher Tortoise (Gopherus Polyphemus)

Description: The official state reptile of Georgia, the gopher tortoise is a relatively large terrestrial turtle, obtaining a maximum carapace length of 38 cm (15 in), though averaging 23-28 cm (9-11 in). Its oblong carapace is unkeeled and domed, somewhat flattened, and brown or gray in color. Distinctive growth annuli are evident in juveniles and young adults, usually becoming obscured later in life. Perhaps the most characteristic features of gopher tortoises are the elephantine hind limbs and the flattened, shovel-like forelimbs. The head is wide and rounded, with a pair of seasonally-swollen mental glands on the chin. Males have slightly concave plastrons.

Range: Extant or historical localities in Georgia are known throughout the southern half of the state below the Fall Line (Columbus-Macon-Augusta). They are apparently absent from the Okefenokee Swamp and most barrier islands except where they were introduced in 1994.

Habitat: Gopher tortoises are a characteristic species of the rapidly disappearing longleaf pine and wiregrass community, which includes sandhills, flatwoods, and turkey oak scrub. Historically, this community was represented by an open-canopied forest that allowed abundant sunlight penetrations and conditions favorable for a rich growth of herbaceous vegetation.

The camps of the **Withlacoochee Lodge** (Camp Osborn and Camp Patten) are excellent examples of the historical community.

The Keystone Species of the Community

Life History: Gopher tortoises dig unbranched burrows up to, and sometimes greater than, 10 m (33 ft) long. The burrows are excavated wide enough to allow room for the tortoise to turn around at any point and may have an enlarged terminal chamber. A single tortoise may dig more than one burrow each season, and occupancy of a burrow by more than one tortoise may occur.

Burrows provide winter hibernacula, retreat from the summer heat, and shelter from fire for not only the tortoise, but also for hundreds on invertebrate and vertebrate animal species, the endangered Indigo Snake being a primary co-inhibitor of the burrow. Tortoises also benefit plant life by returning leached nutrients to the surface, creating bare, competition-free areas of soil, and dispersing seeds through fruit consumption and subsequent defecation elsewhere. The gopher tortoise existence is critical to the existence of many other species.

It has been estimated that the average female gopher tortoise in Georgia has an effective rate of reproduction of about 5.8 hatchlings per 10 years, assuming annual egg laying, females may not attain sexual maturity until 19-20 years of age.

