

Kids' pages

Are you ready to learn about the bay?

News for the kids
of Tampa Bay!

Winter 2017/18



Got a Question? Ask a Scientist!

In This Issue:

- Learn about the Gopher Tortoise
- Meet and Greet: Friends of the Gopher Tortoise
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Mark your Calendars!



GREAT AMERICAN CLEANUP

Saturday, March 17

Pitch in for the Great American Cleanup on Saturday, March 17 from 9am - noon at Fort De Soto Park! This event is family-friendly and open to all ages. Go to tampabaywatch.org to register as a volunteer.

Q I saw a turtle in my backyard near a hole in the ground; do I need to bring him to the water?

A Not necessarily, it sounds like it may have been a **gopher tortoise!** Not all turtles belong in the water. They should be left in the environment in which they were originally found. Though they are all considered "turtles," there are actually three general types: turtles, terrapins, and tortoises. Most **turtles** spend most of their time in the water. They have modified feet with webbing or flippers and a flat shell to move easily through the water. There are both freshwater turtles, like your common yellow-bellied slider (*Trachemys scripta*), and sea turtles, like your leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*). **Terrapins** are given their name because of where they can be found. The term terrapin is given to types of turtles that usually spend their time in brackish water, the mixture of fresh and saltwater, like the ornate diamondback terrapin (*Malaclemys terrapin macrospilota*). **Tortoises** live only on land. They have a rounded shell, are slow moving, and have special stocky legs for digging and burrowing.

Gopher tortoises are a species grey, brown, or tan in color, which can get up to around 9-11 inches long. They are known for the burrows they dig, similar to that of gophers, which is where they get their names. The burrows are usually around 15 feet long



and 7 feet deep. They not only provide protection for the tortoise, but also provide a home for over 350 types of animals and insects. A few of these animals are the burrowing owl, indigo snake, gopher frog, pine snake, rabbits, Florida mouse, gopher cricket and many more. Gopher tortoises are labeled a keystone species because of the animals that rely on them and their burrows. A keystone species is an animal that shapes an ecosystem. Without keystone species, the environment would be very different and there would be a negative impact on other animals living in the area. The gopher tortoise is extremely important for our Florida wildlife. 🐢

Sources:

arkive.org; conserveturtles.org; bioone.org; myfwc.com; fws.gov; livescience.com; nationalgeographic.org; vieravoice.com (photo)

Expand Your Mind!

Meet & Greet: Friends of the Gopher Tortoise!



EASTERN INDIGO SNAKE

Drymarchon corais couperi

Eastern indigo snakes are nonvenomous snakes found in Florida and other parts of the southeastern United States. They are a shiny black or indigo color with reddish faces.

They are the longest snake in the U.S. and can get up to almost nine feet! Indigo snakes like to live in similar habitats as gopher tortoises and use their burrows as shelter from harsh climates. They are important to humans because of their ability to eat venomous snakes.

Indigos are protected in Florida.

Sources: fws.gov; srelherp.uga.edu; animaldiversity.org; nature.org



BURROWING OWL

Athene cunicularia

Burrowing owls are a small sandy-brown owl species that spends most of their lives on the ground. Their lighter sandy coloration gives them impressive camouflage. They prefer to live in dry sandy, fielded areas that lack trees and vegetation.

They are known for making homes in abandoned gopher tortoise burrows. Unlike most owls, burrowing owls are awake during the day time. They eat small mammals, reptiles, amphibians and insects. Many of the insects the owls eat are a bother to humans, like cockroaches and crickets.

Burrowing owls are protected in the state of Florida.

Sources: myfwc.com; fnai.org; defenders.org



GOPHER FROG

Lithobates capito

Gopher frogs can be found throughout Florida. They have bumpy, warty skin and their coloration ranges from tan or brown, to grey, with black or brown splotchy spots.

Gopher frogs got their names because they, like many other animals and insects, use gopher tortoise burrows as homes for shelter.

Gopher frogs feed on some of the other organisms found in the burrows like spiders, beetles, worms, crickets, and small frogs.

Sources: iucnredlist.org; ufwildlife.ifas.ufl.edu; myfwc.com; fws.gov



Our education programs get kids into the bay!

Turtle Crossing: Proceed with Caution!

Gopher tortoises love to live in dry sandy, pine and oak uplands and scrub environments.

These types of areas are often found in people's backyards. The number one negative impact affecting these tortoises is their homes being destroyed for land development, or people building their homes, businesses, and roads where the tortoises already live.

There are a few simple ways we can help out our tortoise friends if they are living near our homes. Give the tortoise space and keep pets away from the burrow. Try to avoid blocking, digging, mowing, or disturbing the area around the tortoise's home.

These problems are not only affecting the tortoises, but also the many other animals depending on them.



Being aware and keeping a lookout for our tortoise friends on the road when you or your parents are driving is also a very important way to keep gopher tortoises safe. Tortoises are slow and it can take them awhile to cross the road. You can help the animal by having a parent place them on the other side of the road, in the direction that they are moving.

Do not move the tortoise to a different area or put yourself in danger to help the animal cross. Simple actions can have a large impact.

Sources: nrcs.usda.gov; gophertortoiseCouncil.org; myfwc.com; floridastateparks.org

Fun Facts about Gopher Tortoises!

- Tortoises have been around for millions of years—even before the dinosaurs!
- Gopher tortoises can live around 40-60 years in the wild!
- Gopher tortoises usually feed within 160 feet of their burrow.

Sources: fwc.com; sciencedaily.com

Did You Know...



A tortoise's shell is not something that it carries around—it is made of bone and is attached to its body!



Fun Activity:

Gopher Tortoises Rock!!

Paint rocks to look like your favorite key "stone" species! They make great decorations for potted plants and gardens!

Supplies:

Round smooth rocks, paint (recommended colors: green, brown, black, white), paint brushes, pencil.

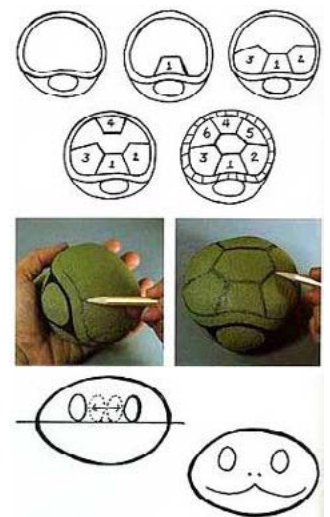
Note: Use paint pens or sharpies instead of paint for quick and easy cleanup!

Instructions:

1. Take one smooth, rounded rock and paint it green (or the body color of your choosing). Let the stone dry completely.
2. Take the painted rock and draw a circle on the top in pencil.
3. Outline the shape that you just made in pencil moving slightly inward to make the edge of your tortoise's shell.
4. Trace the shell you just created in pencil with black paint. Let dry.
5. Below your shell, in pencil, draw a small oval for the tortoise's head.
6. Next to the head of your tortoise on both sides, draw two small half circles, the rounded part facing up for its feet. You may also draw two more half circles on the right and left sides of the back of your rock for back legs.
7. Without filling in the head and feet shapes that you just drew, thickly outline them with black paint. Connect and fill in the outlines of the head and feet. This will make it look like the head and feet are inside the tortoise's shell.
8. Let all paint dry.



9. Draw, in pencil, an isosceles triangle along the front inner rim of the outline of the shell. Continue to draw this shape on the right and left sides of the first triangle you drew until the entire shell is filled. This is creating the scales on the tortoise's shell.
10. Paint over the pencil with black paint. Allow to completely dry.
11. Inside the oval that you have painted for the head, draw two smaller circles for the eyes. You can also give your tortoise a nice happy smile! Paint over any remaining pencil lines in black or whatever you color you see fit.
12. Add any additional creative details you would like!



Source: pinterest.com

Kids' pages Investigations

Topic: Gopher Tortoises



Winter 2017-18 edition

Instructions: Read through the appropriate Kids' Pages edition and answer the questions below. Once all the questions have been completed, refer to the Answer Key to check your work.

Multiple Choice (choose one):

- Gopher tortoise burrows are typically how many feet deep?
 - 9 feet
 - 11 feet
 - 7 feet
 - 15 feet
- These burrows can provide a home for over how many species of animals?
 - 60
 - 150
 - 200
 - 350
- Which animal below is NOT one that can be found in a gopher tortoise burrow?
 - Yellow-bellied slider
 - Burrowing owl
 - Pine snake
 - Florida mouse
- Eastern indigo snakes are the longest snake in the US, reaching up to how many feet in length?
 - 3 feet
 - 9 feet
 - 7 feet
 - 11 feet
- How far away will a gopher tortoise travel to forage for food?
 - 800 feet
 - 1 mile
 - 160 feet
 - ½ mile

Fill in the Blank:

- Turtles can be differentiated from tortoises by their modified _____ and a _____ shell.
- "Terrapin" is a term given to turtles that spend a majority of their time in _____. (2 words).
- Tortoises live only on land and have special, stocky _____ for digging.
- Gopher tortoises are labeled a _____ (2 words) because other animals rely on them and their burrows to shape an environment.

Short Response:

- Using the information from the *Conservation Corner* section of *Kids' Pages*, write out five actions humans can do to lessen our effects on gopher tortoises and the animals in their burrows. Consider sharing those actions with friends and family to raise awareness about gopher tortoises and ways everyone can help!

Kids' pages Investigations

Topic: Gopher Tortoises



Winter 2017-18 edition

ANSWER KEY

1. C. They can also be around 15 feet in length!
2. D. Over 350 other species will use their burrows for shelter and protection.
3. A. Yellow-bellied sliders are freshwater turtles that spend their time in lakes, rivers, and streams.
4. B. They are non-venomous, but can eat venomous snakes.
5. C. Tortoises do not travel far from their burrows in case of sudden danger.
6. Turtles can be differentiated from tortoises by their modified **feet** and a flat **shell**.
7. "Terrapin" is a term given to turtles that spend a majority of their time in **brackish water**. (2 words)
8. Tortoises live only on land and have special, stocky **legs** for digging.
9. Gopher tortoises are labeled a **keystone species** (2 words) because other animals rely on them and their burrows to shape an environment.
10. Answers will vary. *Example answer: Human beings should always perform a land assessment before beginning construction, to make sure no gopher tortoise burrows are present. If you see a gopher tortoise, give it space and do not let pets get close to avoid causing damage to the slow-moving reptile. Avoid getting too close to the burrow to eliminate any chance of accidentally caving in the burrow. Lastly, with parent supervision or help, help a gopher tortoise out of the road as long as the scenario is safe. Never put yourself in danger!*