

**In This Issue:**

- **Message from a Co-Chair**
- **Annual Meeting Announcement**
- **Updates from recipients of the Donna J. Heinrich Education Award**



The eastern coachwhip, an occasional inhabitant of gopher tortoise burrows. *Photo by Michalina Dziadzio, Joseph W. Jones Ecological Research Center.*



Gopher frogs are often observed in tortoise burrows during the non-breeding season. *Photo by Gabe Miller, Prairie Island Indian Commission.*

Message From a Co-Chair**David Steen**

As of a few weeks ago, according to the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the best case scenario for the Gopher Tortoise in the eastern portion of its range is that the species is “likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range”. The worst-case scenario is that the species is already endangered, which the FWS defines as, “in danger of extinction within the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range.”

I am of course referring to the outcome of the recent FWS review of the status of Gopher Tortoise populations east of the Mobile and Tombigbee Rivers in Alabama, in response to a petition detailing why the species should be protected under the Endangered Species Act. The ambiguity results from the official conclusion that although there is sufficient evidence to suggest the tortoise is in trouble, due to limited funds it cannot be listed as Threatened or Endangered under the Endangered Species Act at the current time. Therefore, the Gopher Tortoise is now considered a Candidate Species. The original petition to list the tortoise was filed over five years ago; the FWS’s recent conclusion must feel vindicating to the petitioners and all others who have argued that Gopher Tortoise declines deserve federal attention. However, there is little additional protection afforded with the tortoise’s newly official status as a Candidate Species. On the positive side, now that the Gopher Tortoise is a Candidate Species, there is still the opportunity to develop a Candidate Conservation Agreement that could engage stakeholders in developing a management and recovery plan for the species to preclude the need for listing under ESA. The FWS also provides technical and financial assistance to landowners wishing to conserve species with Candidate status on their land through a number of federal assistance programs. Hopefully, these agreements along with the candidate status will allow landowners to develop practices that are compatible with their needs while preserving the ecological requirements of viable tortoise populations. Time will tell. The FWS has provided a useful Frequently Asked Questions page in relation to its Gopher Tortoise Findings. I encourage anyone interested to check it out (http://www.fws.gov/northflorida/GopherTortoise/12-month_Finding/2011_faq_Gopher_Tortoise_ESA_12-month_Listing_finding.htm).

Buried within the official FWS report are a few references to another issue that has involved The Gopher Tortoise Council in the past. Since at least some rattlesnakes are collected for rattlesnake roundups by pouring gasoline or gasoline vapors down Gopher Tortoise burrows, the FWS believes continued unregulated harvest of rattlesnakes represents a “current and future threat to the Gopher Tortoise”. They also state that enforcement of current anti-gassing state laws “would likely be enhanced with development of a regulated harvest of rattlesnakes or a prohibition on rattlesnake harvest.” The signs seem to point to eventual federal intervention to stop unregulated harvest of rattlesnakes, a practice they deem harmful to a species (i.e., the Gopher Tortoise) waiting to be placed on the Endangered Species Act. The three remaining rattlesnake roundups in the southeastern United States have been reluctant to change their wildlife-exploiting ways, despite the offers of many individuals and organizations (including The Gopher Tortoise Council) to help them transition to more “wildlife-friendly” events. One wonders if they will soon have a choice.

This will be my last Note from a Co-Chair; my two-year tenure is coming to an end this October during our annual meeting. It’s been an honor to serve The Gopher Tortoise Council; thank you for the opportunity. Hope to see you this October in Orlando.

33rd Annual Meeting of the Gopher Tortoise Council– October 14-16, 2011**Wyndham Orlando Resort, Orlando, Florida****"Gopher Tortoise Conservation- Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow"**

Registration details can be found on pg. 6 of the newsletter and on our website:

www.gophertortoisecouncil.org

CONTRIBUTED ARTICLES

Focus on the Gopher Tortoise at Ft. White High/Middle School

Valerie Thomas, PARKnership Coordinator



Ginger Morgan, park biologist, educating students prior to gopher tortoise mapping.

On Friday, March 18, nine sixth graders from Fort White Middle School, along with three high schoolers, Ms. Johannesen, and Ms. Thomas, went to Ichetucknee Springs State Park to help Ms. Ginger Morgan, the park biologist, map and chart gopher tortoise burrows. We split into groups and walked through a section of the park. If we found a gopher tortoise burrow, we marked its waypoint with a GPS, measured the width of the burrow and its orientation and described it as active, inactive or abandoned. We found many, many burrows. One group even saw an indigo snake! It was a lot of fun, but by the heat of the day, I wished I had brought a bigger, colder drink. I think we were all glad Ms. Johannesen had some cold punch and orange drink waiting for us when we got back.

- Max Burrows, Ms. Johannesen's 6th grade



Ms. Donovan's Intensive math classes were responsible for completing the enclosure that the school built for Peter and Wendy, the park's resident gopher tortoises. They had to measure, cut and nail wood to complete the structure. It wasn't easy, but it looked great when it was done. Now Sam Cole, the Park Services Specialist, will make the final touches on the enclosure. He will construct a gate for easy access to the pen, and he is also making special burrows for the tortoises. The coolest thing that he is adding is an elevator for Peter and Wendy, which will make it easier to retrieve them when he wants to show them to visitors. Don't you wish you had an elevator in your home?

CONTRIBUTED ARTICLES

Turtle Talks- update

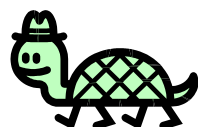
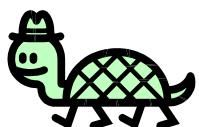
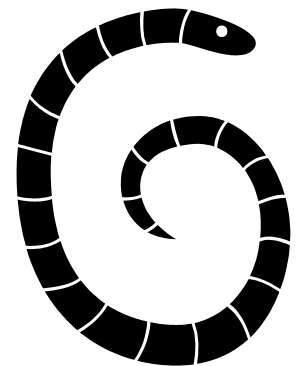
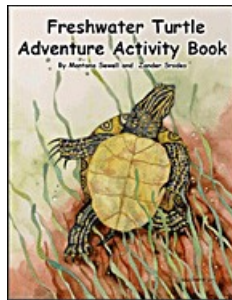
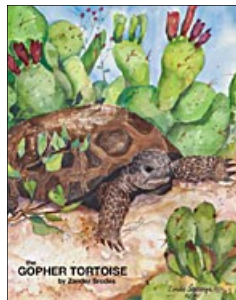
Zander Srodes

On a cool March morning, Montana Sewell loaded a poster and Gopher Tortoise Activity Books into her car and drove to Stark, Florida to the L.E.E.F., League of Environmental Educators of Florida Conference. A new driver at seventeen, it was her first road trip alone out of her home town of Gainesville. Turtle Talks had been invited to come and share books with the educators and environmentalists attending the conference. Montana was well received and handed out three hundred books, and took orders for another two thousand.

Since that time the team headed by Zander Srodes has made a number of Turtle Talks around the state. This year the book illustrator, Linda Soderquist, has also been making presentations to students, many at after school and summer programs in Sarasota and Charlotte County. Linda joined up with the team members at the Nature Festival in Charlotte County and then again in Hardee County where they spoke at every elementary school in the county. This was the third time that Turtle Talks had been invited to talk to fifth graders at each elementary school. This is by invitation from Kayton Nezda with the Outdoor Classroom. They also shared a pizza lunch with the high school environmental club.

It is because of the Donna J. Heinrich Grant that the team has been able to take and send out thousands of activity books this year. The Big Cypress Nature Preserve, Gumbo Limbo Nature Center, the Hobe Sound Nature Center, Cedar Point Environmental Center and the Lyonia Environmental Center also asked for books. College professors applied for books to share them with their students at Florida Gulf Coast University, Florida Atlantic University, and the University of Florida. There was also a call for activity books from the Department of the Navy environmental department, Suwannee River Water Management District, St. Johns River Management District and Southwest Florida Water Management District. The names of the public and private elementary schools are too endless to list.

Thanks to the Gopher Tortoise Council for posting the Gopher Tortoise Activity Book and the Freshwater Turtle Adventure Activity Book on their website so that educators and environmentalists can download pages and share them with youngsters.



CONTRIBUTED ARTICLES

Enchanted Forest Sanctuary

Joe Swingle



The nature center at the Enchanted Forest Sanctuary.



The Enchanted Forest Sanctuary (EFS) is a County nature Sanctuary with over 20 acres of fire-managed scrub and 100 individual gopher tortoises on site, and is therefore an ideal setting for teaching about gopher tortoises and uplands. Education programs at the EFS are free and are supported and led by volunteers from the Friends of the Enchanted Forest, Inc. and staff and volunteers from Brevard County's Environmentally Endangered Lands (EEL) Program.

The idea of offering educational programs with gopher tortoises as the main topic was sparked in 2008 when we were invited by the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission to give presentations for their summer outreach program that focused on imperiled animal species in Brevard County. We chose the gopher tortoise as our spotlight species, and we presented at several libraries using basic props such as the shells of a gopher tortoise and a water turtle, some tortoise scat in a vial, survey equipment, laminated pictures of controlled burns, and a rehabilitated gopher tortoise from the EFS.

The presentations were a hit with attendees and library staff! At the time we were also looking to create a three-hour middle school program to add to our lineup at the EFS. Due to the success of the imperiled species outreaches, we chose the gopher tortoise as the topic for the pilot.

We conducted the pilot middle school courses in the spring of 2009, and the programs also received lots of positive feedback from teachers and students. The Donna J. Heinrich Environmental Educational Grant was awarded to the FEF in the fall of 2009, and funds from the grant, along with matching funds from the FEF and the EFS, were used to help expand the middle school program to include 9th-12th grades, to further refine the tortoise outreach program, and to put together "Meet-a-Tortoise" events for the general public. The new supplies included a tortoise replica, soil and light meters, calipers, parts for making a burrow scope, puppets, a display backing, and software for developing student worksheets, signs, and other media.

The "Meet-a-Tortoise", outreach, and 7th-12th grade programs were conducted in spring of 2010, with the outreach and school programs currently ongoing. These programs were so well-received by teachers and students that we decided to also align our already-established kindergarten through sixth grade curricula to the gopher tortoises and scrub theme!

Participants in the three-hour 3rd through 12th grade program conduct surveys of: tortoises (including individuals, burrows, tracks, and scat), plant diversity, and conditions in two areas of scrub (fire-managed and non-fire managed). The data collected helps the students determine if tortoises 'prefer' to live in fire-managed scrub or

CONTRIBUTED ARTICLES

Enchanted Forest Sanctuary cont'd

scrub that has not been burned in over half a century, and which of the two areas provides better habitat conditions for tortoises. Participants are also given a Power Point presentation about gopher tortoises, controlled burns, aquifer recharge, and human impacts to tortoises and their habitats. They later conduct an activity testing the strength of mock burrows of different shapes to investigate how shape plays a role in the burrows' structural integrity, and conclude that even 'unoccupied' burrows can still potentially provide shelter for various animals for many years. Before departing they are given literature about controlled burns, and groups leaders are given one or two native plants that tortoises are known to eat (many schools in the County are built on coastal scrub and have wild tortoises living on-site).

Kindergarten through second grade participants go on a guided nature hike through the scrub, count burrows in the burned and unburned areas, sketch plants that tortoises have been known to eat, learn how to identify at least one scrub plant using ID cards and clues about the plant's leaves, play scrub bingo, and watch a puppet show version of the story "How Gimble Gopher Found A New Home," by Kay Thorpe Bannon and Rebecca Eagan.

The gopher tortoise is playing the role of catalyst in helping a variety of residents forge emotional connections to our local scrub areas and their inhabitants. These programs have also provided a platform for informing residents both young and old about fire, aquifer recharge & drinking water, land management, and the EEL Program. We also offer programs with topics such as birdwatching, butterfly identification, plants, and decomposers, but the gopher tortoise programs get requested over the others ten-to-one!

Thanks to support from the Gopher Tortoise Council, FEF, EEL Program, and Publix, we have been able to offer quality, free educational programs about gopher tortoises and the scrub to a wide variety of residents!

The EFS is located at 444 Columbia Boulevard in Titusville on central Florida's east coast. For more information, visit efs/eelbrevard.com or call (321) 264-5185.



Our new display and burrow sign!

Author Bio: Joe Swingle, North Region Naturalist, Brevard County Environmentally Endangered Lands (EEL) Program, Enchanted Forest Sanctuary Management and Education Center, Titusville, FL .

GOPHER TORTOISE COUNCIL ANNOUNCEMENTS

33rd Annual Gopher Tortoise Council Meeting

Please join us October 14-16 at the Wyndham Orlando Resort in Orlando, Florida.
This year's theme is "Gopher Tortoise Conservation- Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow."

Registration materials can be found on the GTC web site: www.gophertortoisecouncil.org. Registration for the meeting closes on October 5.

Don't forget about the ANNUAL SILENT AUCTION!! Please bring your items with you to registration!!

The Fall Business Meeting will be held at Augustine's Restaurant at WOR the evening of October 13th, prior to the annual meeting.

*****NOTE*****

Rooms have been blocked at a very discounted rate of \$99/ night. Book early as we expect them to go fast. You must secure your hotel room on your own by September 25th to get the reduced rate for the GTC Annual Mtg. Rooms are first come first serve .

Friday, October 14th: Commensal Species Conservation, Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

Friday will kick off with a keynote presentation (TBA) followed by presentations highlighting gopher tortoise and commensal species conservation. In the afternoon, a series of presentations will address various aspects of commensal species protection, ranging from past lessons learned, current ongoing projects and future conservation measures needed to ensure heightened awareness of the threats and ways to ensure their survival.

Registration begins at 8:00 a.m. Keynote Presentation begins at 9:00 a.m.

Saturday, October 15th: Gopher Tortoise Conservation, Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

Conference sessions will focus on gopher tortoise and upland habitat conservation efforts from the past, present endeavors and future needs. On Saturday afternoon, there will be a question and answer session with a panel of experts. Topic for discussion will be "Gaps in our Current Knowledge" as they relate to the gopher tortoise and commensal species.

Sunday, October 16th: Central Florida Natural Areas Field Trips, TBA

Current Research

Kinlaw, A., and M. Grasmueck. 2011. Evidence for and Geomorphologic Consequences of a Reptilian Ecosystem Engineer: The Burrowing Cascade Initiated by the Gopher Tortoise. *Geomorphology*. In press.

Lovich, J.E., J.R. Ennen, S. Madrak, and B. Grover. 2011. Turtles and Culverts, and Alternative Energy Development: An Unreported but Potentially Significant Mortality Threat to the Desert Tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*). *Chelonian Conservation and Biology* 10(1):124-129.

McCoy, E.D., R.D. Moore, H.R. Mushinsky, and S.C. Pupa. 2011. Effects of Rainfall and the Potential Influence of Climate Change on Two Congeneric Tortoise Species. *Chelonian Conservation and Biology* 10(1): 34-41.

Rose, F.L., F.W. Judd, and M.F. Small. 2011. , Survivorship in Two Coastal Populations of *Gopherus berlandieri*. *Journal of Herpetology* 45 (1):75-78.

GOPHER TORTOISE COUNCIL ANNOUNCEMENTS

Donna J. Heinrich Environmental Education Grant Program

The GTC environmental education grant was established to support educators and organizations committed to developing educational projects about the gopher tortoise and the fascinating world in which it lives. The grant also honors Donna June Heinrich, an environmental educator whose life was dedicated to conserving wildlife and their associated habitats. Deadline for 2011 applications is August 31st. Applications may be downloaded from our web site (www.gophertortoiseCouncil.org/grants.php). On the left hand side of the page click "Grants Program" and scroll down after the grants page loads. Applications which contain the following will be given preference:

- Projects that reach diverse and new audiences.
- Projects that focus on the importance of the conservation of intact upland ecosystems.
- Projects that encourage community involvement.
- Projects that have matching funds.

Please follow the instructions on the grants program page noting the requirements.

For questions contact Laura Wewerka at: wewerka@embarqmail.com

The J. Larry Landers Student Research Award

The J. Larry Landers Student Research Award is a Gopher Tortoise Council competitive grant program for undergraduate and graduate college students. Proposals can address research concerning gopher tortoise biology or any other relevant aspect of upland habitat conservation and management. The amount of the award is variable, but has averaged \$1,000.00 over the last few years. The proposal should be limited to four pages in length and should include a description of the project, a concise budget, and a brief resume of the student.

This is an excellent opportunity for undergraduate and graduate students to access funding for their projects.

The deadline for grant proposals each year is the 15th of September.

Please send submissions to:

Bob Herrington Ph.D.
Department of Biology
Georgia Southwestern State University, Americus, GA 31709
Americus, GA, 31709
229-931-2331



Alaparc Meeting Announcement

Registration and Abstract submission is now open for this years ALAPARC meeting at www.alaparc.org. This year's meeting will be held at Camp McDowell, adjacent to the Bankhead National Forest. The meeting will be held from lunch on Friday, September 30th through breakfast on Sunday, October 2nd. We will depart from the format of our previous meetings. Various herp outings will be arranged during the day. We hope to hit some surefire herping spots chosen by some Bankhead experts. Oral and poster presentations will be in the evenings. Don't worry, we will also have plenty of time for our traditional socializing both nights.

Newsletter of The Gopher Tortoise Council

Directory of 2011 Gopher Tortoise Council Officers,
Committee Chairs, and State Representatives
Please view the GTC website (below) for contact information

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Connie Henderson

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The Tortoise Burrow

<http://www.gophertortoisecouncil.org>

The Tortoise Burrow is published in December, April and August. Deadlines for submission of announcements and articles are the 15th of the preceding month. Send materials to the editor:

Lora Smith

lora.smith@jonesctr.org

Decisions concerning publication of submitted material rest with the editor and co-chairs.

Reprint Policy: Articles, photographs or opinions that appear in *The Tortoise Burrow* may be reprinted with the written consent of the editor and GTC Co-chairs.

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