

Fort Matanzas

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

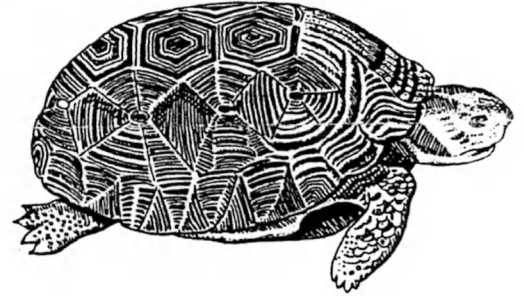
Fort Matanzas National Monument



American Gopher Tortoise

(Gopherus polyphemus)

The American Gopher Tortoise is probably the best known of all burrow dwelling turtles. Gopher tortoises (genus *Gopherus*) inhabit the southern United States and Mexico. They make their homes here in Florida by digging with their powerful forelimbs into the sides of dunes and other soft, sandy areas.



Burrows are built at a slight angle into the ground for a depth of five to ten feet and extend for as much as thirty feet under ground. The bottom of the burrow has a roomy chamber with enough space for the turtle to turn around.

Gopher tortoises grow to a size of 12 inches and are characterized by large, strong forelimbs with long claws for digging. They have a relatively long, flat-topped shell (carapace) which varies in color from brown to green. The Gopher Tortoise frightens easily and will retreat into its shell or nearby burrow if disturbed. Gopher Tortoises use their acute sense of smell to seek out their favorite food, the prickly pear cactus, but they will also eat young grass shoots and practically anything else that's green.

Being a reptile, the gopher tortoise needs the sun to warm itself, but will seek shelter in the hot mid-day sun. Your best opportunity to spot a gopher tortoise at Fort Matanzas is on our nature trail or the beach boardwalk in early morning and late afternoon.

There are over 80 species of animals that depend on abandoned or active gopher tortoise burrows for homes, safety and mid-day or bad weather refuge. Some of those animals that use active burrows include rattlesnakes, raccoons, gopher frogs, eastern indigo snakes, skinks, lizards, opossum and skunks. These animals do not affect the coming and going of the tortoise in any way. Animals that live in abandoned tortoise burrows include the burrowing owl, beach mice, rats, foxes, rabbits, and quail.

The habitat favored by the gopher tortoise (beach dunes and high scrub) is also favored by people as prime real estate. Therefore, the gopher tortoise is a species of special concern in Florida due to habitat loss and the encroachment of Man. The survival of this species has far-reaching effects on the survival of many other animals who take shelter in the tortoise's burrow, some of which are themselves threatened or even endangered.

If you see a turtle on the beach during the day, it is most likely a gopher tortoise. These are land animals, so don't try to help it by putting it into the ocean. (Sea turtles have flippers instead of feet.)

Remember-- All plants and animals in the park are protected by state and federal laws.

Please observe them from a distance.