



Meet the Gopher Tortoise!



Identification



Stumpy back legs



Shovel like front feet



Broad head with non-projecting snout

Juvenile gopher tortoises



Adult gopher tortoises



Where do gopher tortoises live?



Where else do we find them?



What do they eat?



The burrow

- 7 feet deep and can reach more than 15 feet long!
- A tortoise can have more than one burrow at a time
- A tortoise burrow looks like a half moon



Burrow buddies



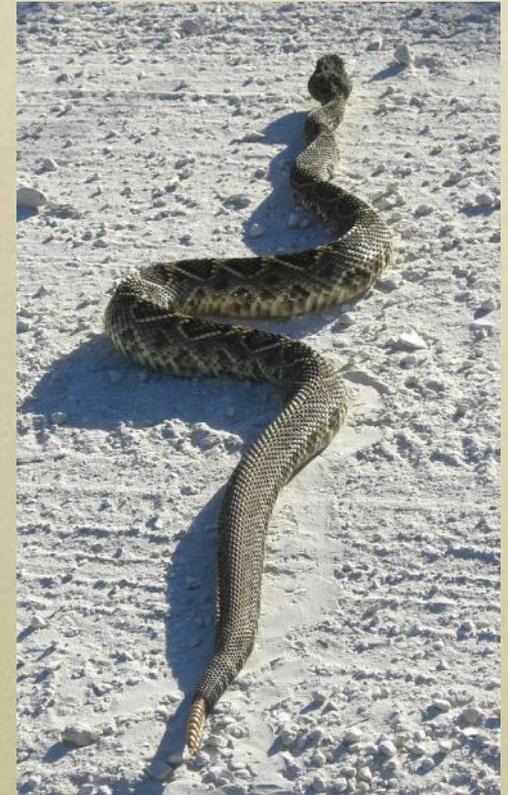
Indigo snake

Florida pine snake



Gopher frog

Florida mouse



Diamondback rattlesnake

Now lets take a closer look!



Slide 1

Ask kids if anyone has seen a gopher tortoise and where.

NOTE: ‘*...*’ will indicate a suggestion for interaction with the kids in the audience.

Slide 2

Gopher tortoises have flat, shovel like front feet for digging long burrows, and stumpy elephant-like back legs. They have a broad head with flat snout.

** "Did the tortoises you've seen look like this?" **

Slide 3

Baby gopher tortoises are called juveniles. Juveniles are less than 5 inches long and have a soft shell with a yellow/orange color. Their shells will get hard at about 7 years of age. Since adults do not look after the hatchlings, and since their shells are soft for so long, juveniles are quite vulnerable to their environment and other species that live in it. They may use an existing burrow or even dig their own tiny one for shelter.

Pass around ping pong ball for size comparison of tortoise eggs.

Slide 4

Adult gopher tortoises will have a gray/brown color. They can weigh up to 15 pounds and average from 9 to 11 inches long, but some can grow to 15 inches in length.

** "Who do you think would be bigger, a male gopher tortoise or a female gopher tortoise?" **

Females actually grow larger than males, and they have a flat underbelly while the males have a slight dent in theirs.

If shells are present, indicate the dent in the males and the flatness of the females.

Slide 5

The gopher tortoise is the only tortoise native to Florida.

** "Does anyone know what that means?" **

This means that, although others may be encountered in the wild, gopher tortoises are the only ones who live here naturally without being brought here from another habitat by someone or something else. They can be found in all 67 counties in Florida, but prefer high, dry, sandy places such as longleaf pine and xeric oak sandhills. The biggest threat to their long-term survival is loss of habitat.

Slide 6

Since they are losing their natural habitat, they are often found living in a variety of anthropogenic (human oriented) or disturbed environments. They are often found living in backyards, along roadsides, or in the playground or soccer fields at school.

Ask if anyone has seen them in any of these spots.

Slide 7

** "What do you think gopher tortoises eat?" **

Gopher tortoises are herbivores.

** "Does anybody know what an herbivore is?" **

Herbivores only eat plants. Gopher tortoise are also generalists. They will eat a great variety of vegetation as long as they can reach it. Some examples of their preferred diet are broadleaf grasses, wiregrass, gopher apples, prickly pear cacti, blackberries, blueberries, and many more.

Slide 8

Ask if anyone has seen a tortoise burrow and what it looked like.

A gopher tortoise burrow is shaped like a half moon because that is the general shape of the tortoises. The rounded out top is from the roundness of the top of their shells. Burrows are on average 7 feet deep and can be 15 feet long, or sometimes even longer! The burrow is very important for shelter because it keeps its temperatures regulated throughout all of the different seasons. Over 350 other species use gopher tortoise burrows as well.

Slide 9

These species depend upon the tortoise burrows for shelter, food, etc. They are called commensal species. Some examples include the indigo snake, pine snake, gopher frog, opossum, burrowing owl, Florida mouse, gopher cricket and scarab beetle.

Ask if anyone has seen any of these in/near a burrow, or at all.

Slide 10

Engage children in one or two activities.

Examples: A variety of GT artifacts, field trip outside or live gopher tortoise, commensal matching game, human-sized burrow for kids to crawl through, etc.