



Gopher Tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*)

Size: Carapace length, 20–30 cm **Weight:** 2–6 kg **Habitat:** Southeastern United States; prefers habitats with well-drained, sandy soil, including longleaf pine forests **Surviving number:** Unknown; populations declining



Photographed by Joel Sartore

WILDLIFE AS CANON SEES IT

A born burrower. The gopher tortoise is endowed with shovel-like front feet that allow it to dig burrows up to 12 meters in length with relative ease. These underground lairs provide shelter from forest fires and offer hatchlings some protection from the many predators that would like to make them a meal. Other animals use the tortoise's burrows as well, sometimes—but not always—waiting until the tortoise has abandoned them. In fact, these burrows

are so important to the overall ecosystem that the gopher tortoise is considered a keystone species. If its habitat continues to fragment and shrink, however, its burrowing days may well be numbered.

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