

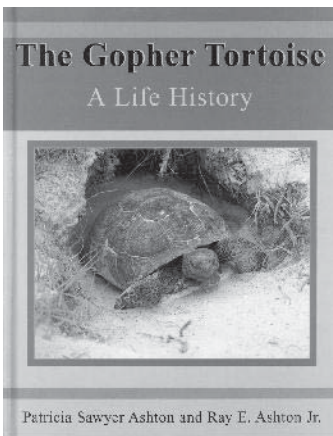
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The Gopher Tortoise, a Life History

The Gopher Tortoise, a Life History. By Patricia and Ray Ashton

Paperback, 67 pages. Pineapple Press (2004)

\$14.95. ISBN-10: 1-56164-301-7

Review by David S. Lee

The Ashtons have been working with gopher tortoises for several decades. Fortunately, their

interests are not limited to academic research but include the development of important conservation planning and land management techniques. A significant portion of the information presented in this book comes from observations and field studies Pat and Ray have conducted on their own biological preserve near Gainesville, Florida. Their 100-acre site is mostly upland habitats, and their well-studied gopher tortoise population has become an index for measuring successful community management. Pat has a strong background in science education, and much of Ray's life has been devoted to field studies and, more recently, conservation. Ray has never been hesitant in pointing out the many flaws in various state wildlife laws adversely affecting tortoise populations, and more importantly he has provided valuable suggestions for alternate solutions. Because of this combined experience I cannot think of any two people more qualified to author this particular book.

The book's title, *The Gopher Tortoise: A Life History*, actually understates the scope of this contribution. Much important information regarding the tortoise's ecology, tested management techniques, conservation needs, and field research activities is also provided. The major sections of the book, each color coded, are: meet the gopher tortoise, the burrow, how we can learn about the gopher tortoise, daily life, where they live, and how to help the gopher tortoise. The book is both simply, and from an educational perspective, brilliantly organized. Page after page of basic information can evolve within the reader's mind into the complex mosaic of concepts necessary for gopher tortoise populations to exist. This is not a how-to conservation cookbook as each management site will have its own specific needs. In the long haul, it will be educational contributions such as this book, not laws and regulations, that will allow people to first appreciate, and then support, the need for protection of creatures such as gopher tortoises.

To its credit, this book is not bogged down in traditional academic style, nor was it designed to appease the predetermined standards of academic reviewers. I found it refreshing to read an informative publication uncluttered by scientific names and rambling professional jargon. The few unavoidable terms, like "assessment" and "canopy," that have different meanings to biologists and land managers are clearly defined in a glossary. Defining "feces" as "poop" is something most readers will understand. This is a publication designed for anyone with curiosity. Even without an existing interest in gopher tortoises, readers will come away with an appreciation of the complexity of a seemingly simple reptilian lifestyle. Essentially each page is a self-contained lesson about these

tortoises, and readers are drawn into the unassuming text through an array of colored photographs complementing the concepts as they are discussed. Because of this photo-rich layout I suspect many readers will discover themselves enjoying portions of the text that they would have otherwise skipped over.

In addition to information addressing the tortoise per se, the authors provide a brief review of the fossil history of southeastern North American tortoises, a glossary, bibliography, and an appendix listing all the animal species discussed in the book, many of which are commensals, or otherwise regularly associated with gopher tortoises. Most importantly, they also include a list of agencies and organizations (including addresses, websites, and other contact information) that are responsible for overseeing these tortoises. While for many much of all this would seem to be very basic information, keep in mind this is a region where rural folks still refer to pocket gophers as "salamanders" and to tortoises as "gophers."

If future editions are published, the story line would further benefit by including lists of the characteristic plants of the primary habitats occupied by gopher tortoises. Likewise, descriptions of natural flatwood, scrub, and sandhill communities along with more details of the successional events that produce and eventually degrade them would be informative and useful to land managers concerned with the long-term needs of these tortoises.

As Florida continues to be developed, conflict between people and tortoises competing for upland sites will escalate. There are growing concerns with legal issues for landowners, developers, enforcement agencies, and the conservation community. The gopher tortoise is not an animal that we should allow to someday exist only in state parks and national forests. It is a keystone species, and thus a wide variety of upland creatures are dependent upon, or at least benefit from, its presence. A significant portion of upland fauna would locally disappear in this tortoise's absence. This book will allow those who care about conservation to choose correct decisions without delaying needed initiatives with the standard line: "we need more research." The Ashtons have compiled the information biologists and land managers have learned over the last three decades and brought it to the public in a way everyone can understand. More importantly, they have good, and practical, suggestions for private-sector involvement in the conservation of both tortoises and their habitats. This book should be in every school and regional library and on the bookshelf of every zoning board within the range of the gopher tortoise. It is a good model for future works addressing other species-focused conservation efforts.

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Editorial Content

We welcome articles on native plant species and related conservation topics, as well as high-quality botanical illustrations and photographs. Contact the editor for guidelines, deadlines and other information.

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The purpose of the Florida Native Plant Society is to conserve, preserve, and restore the native plants and native plant communities of Florida.

Official definition of native plant:

For most purposes, the phrase Florida native plant refers to those species occurring within the state boundaries prior to European contact, according to the best available scientific and historical documentation. More specifically, it includes those species understood as indigenous, occurring in natural associations in habitats that existed prior to significant human impacts and alterations of the landscape.

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