

PRESS KIT

Turtle Team of Indian River County



Gerry Anna Jones

Tortoise Team of Indian River County

1/1/2022

Organization Bio

The Tortoise Team of Indian River County is a group of citizens that are passionate about helping tortoises and turtles avoid roadway injuries. The group is open to anyone that is passionate about helping turtles and tortoises by helping them out of the road and seek medical attention if needed.

Turtles and tortoises parish at a slower rate than other animals based on their metabolism so it's common that if a tortoise is hit by a vehicle and badly injured, they could likely be alive and suffering. The intention of this group is to coordinate the safe transport of injured tortoises and turtles to licensed rehabilitation facilities.

We are not a 501c3 at this time but will be applying for that designation soon.

Founder, Gerry – Anna Jones, Bio

I've always been pretty obsessed with animals. When I was in elementary school, I remember setting up homemade agility courses with chairs and broomsticks for my dog. That desire to spend quality time with animals and give them the best in life has continued throughout my career.

My degree in Anthropology became the foundation for my understanding of the human end, those four years of studying wasn't enough to quench my thirst for knowledge, so I started volunteering almost anywhere I could.

I joined a zookeeper training program and interned at the Oregon Zoo. I volunteered at a wildlife rehabilitation hospital and also with parrot rescues. And just before I started dog training, I worked as a bird trainer at a well-known theme park. But the place which made the most significant difference to what I do today was working with The Humane Society in their shelter programs.

I started my own dog training business but in the back of my mind I've always known I want to end up helping the Gopher Turtles in Florida. I have big goals for what this could look like in the future and am working to build a community that supports that vision.

Mission Statement

The Tortoise Team of Indian River County's mission is to help turtles and tortoises displaced by urban sprawl and construction through tending to injuries they may have suffered and relocation.

The Tortoise Team in one sentence

The Tortoise Team of Indian River County supports turtles and tortoises avoid injury and death due to urban development.

Elevator Speech

The gopher tortoise is one of five North American tortoise species and is the only tortoise naturally found east of the Mississippi River. Gopher tortoises live in parts of all 67 Florida counties. The gopher tortoise is unique in that it is Federally listed as Threatened under the Endangered Species Act in Florida and surrounding states. The Tortoise Team of Indian River County helps provide a network of animal activists who help injured turtles and tortoises get the medical attention they need as well as relocate this protected species due to urban sprawl.

Images are Available Upon Request

From Our Founder

“The reason this group was founded was because I was seeing so many injured turtles and tortoises on the road and it’s absolutely heart wrenching.”

“When you see an injured turtle or tortoise you may think it’s dead because it’s sitting in the road but a lot of times it’s not. Part of the inspiration [for founding this group] was getting these animals the help they need even if that help, as hard as it is, is to euthanize them so they’re no longer in pain. Turtles and Tortoises take a really long time to pass away, their metabolism is super slow, so when you see a hit turtle or tortoise there is a chance that they’re still alive and they’re just suffering slowly.”

“The best thing you can do is get that animal to a facility that can help them. The closest to us is the Vero Beach Humane Society, they have volunteers that can transfer them to the Melbourne Wildlife Hospital.”

“Sometimes you’re driving somewhere and you really can’t stop and you see an injured turtle or tortoise on the side of the road. So I founded this group of community members that are as passionate as I am about helping these animals, they can post in the group where the injured animal is and another group member may be able to go and help that animal. If you see an injured turtle or tortoise and you can’t help it at that moment, we strongly encourage you to put it out in the group so hopefully someone can. The more we grow the network on this group the more likely it is we’ll have someone available to help the animal.”

“Florida Fish and Wildlife are tracking tortoises including tortoise deaths and dens of living tortoises. There’s a form you can fill out (<https://app.myfwc.com/HSC/GopherTortoise/>) to let them know when and where you found a deceased tortoise or if you find one living near you or somewhere you are visiting.”

“You can also request information from the Florida Fish and Wildlife regarding if the company doing construction near you cleared the lot of tortoises before building. Visit the Florida Fish and Wildlife website: <https://myfwc.com/license/wildlife/gopher-tortoise-permits/>”

“We are the watch dogs for these beautiful animals that are here and deserve to be protected.”

“Tortoises take years to reach sexual maturity to breed so every time one is removed from the population it can have devastating results on the population as a whole.”

We encourage everyone to be safe while interacting with wildlife. Because turtles and tortoises are wild animals we encourage everyone to be careful and prepared. We usually have a set of supplies in our vehicles, in case we come across an unfortunate victim of our roadways. This kit includes gloves, an old towel, a contractor bag, and a box.

“The Melbourne Wildlife Hospital is the closest location that has the specialty of care to take care of turtles and tortoises in distress. If that is too far to drive, take it to the [Humane Society of Vero Beach & Indian River County](#). They have volunteers that can drive the injured wildlife up to Melbourne almost daily. You can also check out the Animal Help Now! App for other wildlife rehabilitation facility information.”

Resources (Government)

Gopher tortoises are a threatened species and are protected under state law, Chapter 68A-27 of the Florida Administrative Code (F.A.C.). Property owners must obtain relocation permits from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) to relocate all gopher tortoises before any land clearing or development activities can take place. Rule 68A-27.003 (F.A.C.) The gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) is hereby declared to be threatened, and shall be afforded the protective provisions specified in this paragraph. No person shall take, attempt to take, pursue, hunt, harass, capture, possess, sell or transport any gopher tortoise or parts thereof or their eggs, or molest, damage, or destroy gopher tortoise burrows, except as authorized by Commission permit or when complying with Commission approved guidelines for specific actions which may impact gopher tortoises and their burrows. A gopher tortoise burrow is a tunnel with a cross-section that closely approximates the shape of a gopher tortoise. Permits will be issued based upon whether issuance would further management plan goals and objectives. – *Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission* (<file:///C:/Users/Owner/Downloads/gt-factsheet-laws.pdf>)

Federal Status: Regionally Threatened/Candidate

FL Status: State-designated Threatened

FNAI Ranks: G3/S3 (Rare)

IUCN Status: VU (Vulnerable)

Because gopher tortoises are protected in Florida, handling and relocation of gopher tortoises is an illegal activity unless conducted under a valid permit issued by FWC. In accordance with the [Gopher Tortoise Permitting Guidelines](#), an FWC relocation permit must be obtained before disturbing burrows and conducting construction activities. This status is recognized by the United States Federal Fish and Wildlife Service.

-*Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission*

(<https://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/profiles/reptiles/gopher-tortoise/>)

Gopher Tortoise Management Plan: The revised [Gopher Tortoise Management Plan](#) was approved on September 5, 2012. The revised plan takes the place of the original plan approved in 2007 (see below). Thank you to all stakeholders and members of the public for input and participation throughout this process. – *Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation* (<https://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/wildlife/gopher-tortoise/management-plan/>)

FAQ

- Where do Gopher Tortoises Live?
 - Gopher Tortoises can be found in every county in the state of Florida as well as Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina.
 - Gopher Tortoises prefer a habitat with well drained sandy soils for digging burrows and nesting with an abundant source of plants and foliage to eat.
- What do they do for the environment?
 - Gopher Tortoises spend 80% of their time in/around/digging burrows. These burrows average 15 feet long and over 6 feet deep. Their burrows become homes to more than 350 other species. Gopher Tortoises help provide homes to many other native wildlife throughout their lifetime.
- Why do we need to save them?
 - Taking any animal out of the ecosystem as a whole disrupts the natural balance of that ecosystem. Gopher Tortoises provide shelter for over 350 other species of life in the Florida ecosystem. Without this essential function, those 350 species will also be impacted due to lack of shelter.
- Who can you call if you find one?
 - Because Gopher Tortoises are a protected species within Florida you need to do a few things:
 - Dead tortoise: Report sightings of dead gopher tortoises on [FWC's mortality web application](#) and provide information on cause of mortality, if known. This helps the state keep a better account of the amount of tortoises in the ecosystem and can track their locations better.
 - Sick or injured tortoise: On weekdays from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., please call [\(850\) 921-1030](tel:8509211030). After hours and on weekends, call the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's toll-free Wildlife Alert hotline at (888) 404-3922, or use #FWC or *FWC on your cell phone. You also can text Tip@MyFWC.com. There are only a few wildlife hospitals that can provide care for Gopher Tortoises but local humane societies often coordinate with these hospitals to provide transportation.
 - Healthy Tortoise: If a Tortoise is in a road way, please stop when safely possible and put them safely not in the road way. If there is a Tortoise on your property Congratulations! Gopher tortoises generally make good neighbors and very rarely cause problems for landowners. Enjoy observing the tortoise, but make sure children or pets don't harass it. Don't be too concerned if the tortoise seems to "disappear," since most tortoises use more than one burrow in the course of a year. Just leave the burrow intact, and the same tortoise or a different one may re-occupy it.
 - New construction: If you see or know of a tortoise that is in the area of a new construction development please contact the Tortoise Team of Indian River County or contact Florida Fish and Wildlife so

they can safely relocate the tortoise from the property prior to construction.

- When (what time of year/day) do you see them wandering around?
 - Gopher Tortoises are most active during April through October but the farther south you go the more you will see them as they are also active on warm winter days. They usually forage in the morning and late afternoon (during times of the highest automobile traffic.)
- How much space do they need to thrive?
 - Gopher Tortoises dig burrows typically more than 20 feet long and 6 feet deep so they need a lot of space. If you see a Gopher Tortoise near its burrow give it space. The sandy patch in front of the burrow is often used to incubate their eggs because it's warm. They are wild animals and need space to forage, live, and thrive.
- What to do if one lives on your property?
 - Gopher tortoises generally make good neighbors and very rarely cause problems for landowners. Enjoy observing the tortoise, but make sure children or pets don't harass it. Don't be too concerned if the tortoise seems to "disappear," since most tortoises use more than one burrow in the course of a year. Just leave the burrow intact, and the same tortoise or a different one may re-occupy it.
- What not to do if you see a Gopher Tortoise.
 - Gopher Tortoises are wild animals and like their space so treat it like any other wild animal. Do not pick up the tortoise. Do not take it home with you. Do not disturb its burrow.
- How can I personally help?
 - Join our team and follow us on Facebook to stay up to date. We'll post information about animal rescue opportunities and help you get involved.