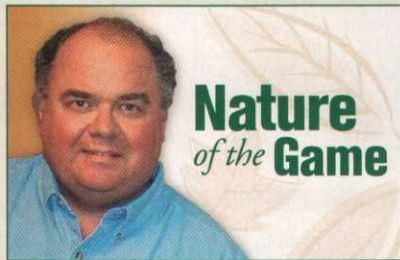


Golf Courses Can Help Preserve Gopher Tortoise

BY RON DODSON

Editor's Note: This new column, which will appear bi-monthly in *Golfdom*, is the idea of Ron Dodson, the CEO of Audubon International. Dodson, who has worked in the environmental field for more than 30 years, has been involved in the development of public policies on the state and federal level and has created many environmental education programs. Dodson can be reached at rdodson@auduboninternational.org.



The gopher tortoise is officially listed as a threatened species in Georgia; a species of special concern in Florida; an endangered species in South Carolina; and is federally listed as threatened in Mississippi, Louisiana and a portion of its range in Alabama.

The primary reasons for the shrinking numbers of gopher tortoises are loss of habitat, poor forestry management practices, disease and road death. As the human population expands and places even more pressure on remaining gopher tortoise habitats, this important species will continue to face declining numbers unless a range-wide conservation effort is put in place.

Dodson's message is simple: Save the gopher tortoise.

Gopher tortoises live in burrows in dry upland habitats, including areas of long leaf pine, flatwoods, dry prairies and coastal dunes. The areas must be well-drained sandy soils for digging purposes, with herbaceous food plants, and open sunny areas for nesting and basking in the sun. Burrows can be up to 40 feet long and 10 feet deep.

These tortoises can live more than 60 years, with females maturing between 10 and 15 years. They breed between April and June each year and lay three to 15 eggs. Gopher tortoises are considered a "keystone" species because their burrows also offer refuge to a range of other animals, including more than 360 species.

Golf courses can play an important role in conserving and protecting this declining species. One excellent example is The Old Collier Golf Club in Naples, Fla. Originally permitted for several hundred housing units, the development company decided instead on a private 18-hole golf course and no housing units.

The property in its entirety was 267 acres, including 50 acres of river corridor and wetlands, and 20 acres of lakes and other associated "developed" acres. The project was to preserve 33.6 acres of upland habitat by permit. But it has preserved and restored 70 acres of upland habitat with more created each year.

There were 74 gopher tortoises found when construction began. Today there are 135 healthy and productive gopher tortoises on the property.

If you would like more information on gopher tortoise conservation, contact the Gopher Tortoise Council, in care of the Florida Museum of Natural History, P.O. Box 117800, University of Florida, Gainesville, Fla 32611.

Or contact the Web site at www.gophertortoisecouncil.org.

The gopher tortoise is a reptile species with declining populations that warrants protection throughout its range on both the state and federal levels.

The tortoise can be found in southern Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, Georgia and throughout a large portion of Florida, but overall population numbers are dwindling.

