



### Session 4.2: Gopher Tortoise Level K-2

Today's activity aims to introduce "P.J" the Gopher Tortoise, the mascot from Pine Jog's Forest. Your child will understand the vital role that the gopher tortoise plays in Florida's ecosystems. You will read **Meet the Gopher Tortoise cards** aloud to your child. The material was adapted from Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission/Florida Gopher Tortoise Day.

Materials needed:

- [Meet the Gopher Tortoise cards](#) (You can print the cards out and staple them as a "booklet" to read, so that you and your child can reuse them; if you do not have a printer at home, it is okay to read them on the computer)
- Ping Pong Ball

Activity:

1. Explain to your child that today they are going to learn about gopher tortoises by reading gopher tortoise cards together and watching an interesting video, then try to answer a couple of questions at the end.
2. Show the cards in order, one by one, and interact with your child as you show them each image.



Meet the Gopher Tortoise!

Card #1: "Have you seen a gopher tortoise before and where?"

## Identification



Stumpy back legs



Shovel like front feet



Broad head with non-projecting snout



Card #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 a flat snout. Did the tortoises you've seen look like this?*

## Juvenile gopher tortoises



Card # 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.*

*\* Show your child the ping pong ball you prepared, this is the size of tortoise eggs\**

## Adult gopher tortoises



Card # 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.*

## Where do gopher tortoises live?



Card # 5: *“The gopher tortoise is the only tortoise native to Florida. Do you 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.*

## Where else do we find them?



Card # 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. Have you seen them in any of these spots?*

## What do they eat?



Card # 7: *“What do you think gopher tortoises eat? Gopher tortoises are herbivores. Do you know what an herbivore is?”*

*Herbivores only eat plants. Gopher tortoises 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.*

## 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



Card # 8: *“Have you ever 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 burrows can be as long as a*

*school bus)! 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.*

## Burrow buddies



Indigo snake



Florida pine snake



Gopher frog



Florida mouse



Diamondback rattlesnake

Card # 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 students if anyone has seen any of these in/near a burrow, or at all.*

3. Watch a short video about [Gopher Tortoises](#).
4. Ask your children the following questions:
  - What did you learn from the video?
  - How long is the gopher tortoise burrow?
  - How many other species use gopher tortoise burrows?
5. Please share what you learned with your family members.