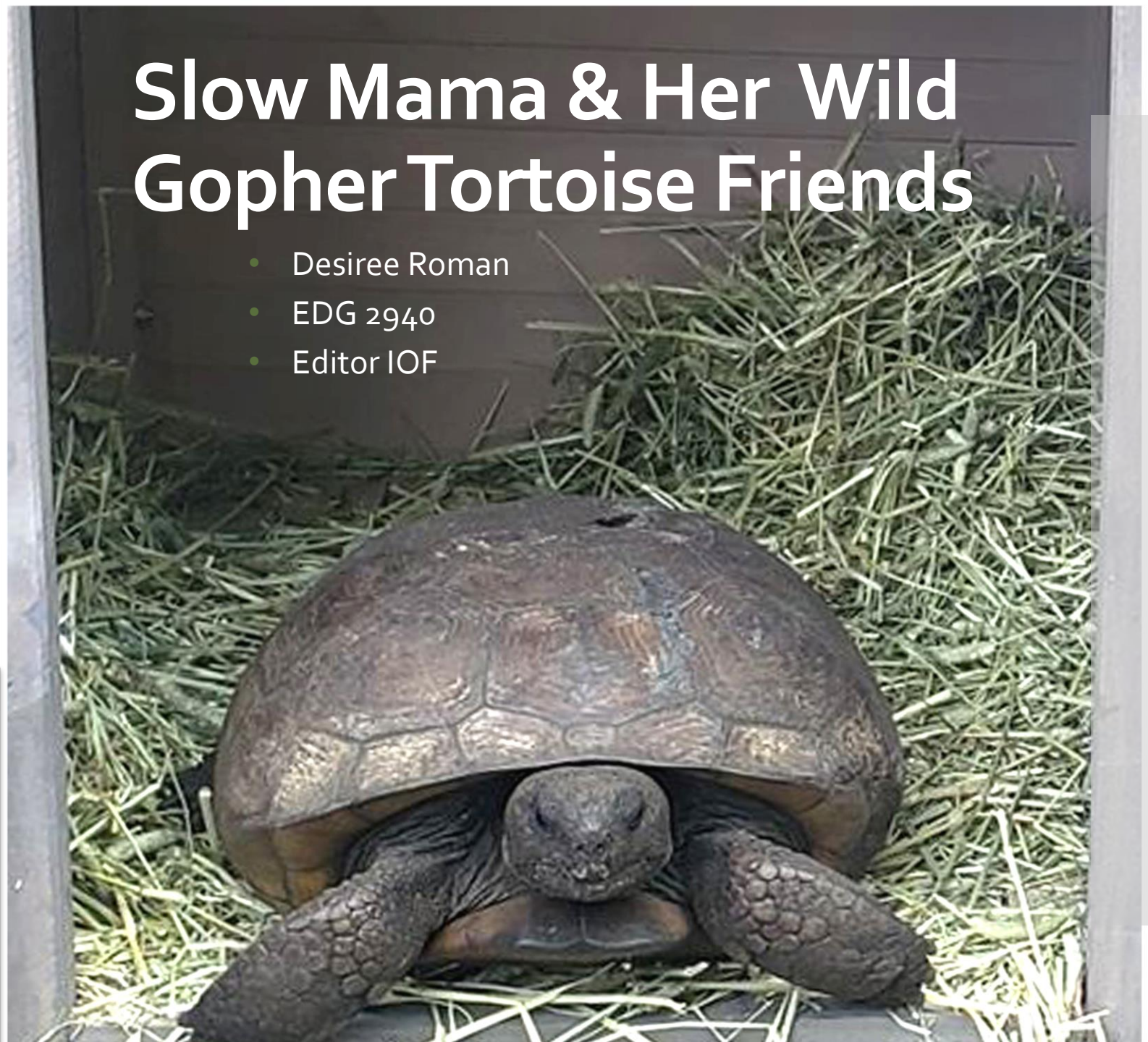


Slow Mama & Her Wild Gopher Tortoise Friends

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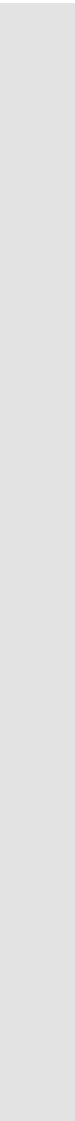
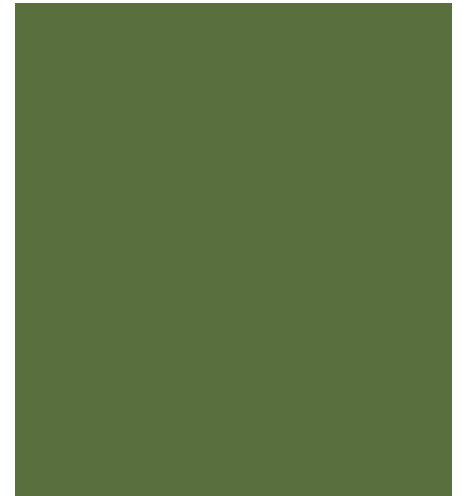


Who is Slow Mama?

- Slow Mama is a gopher tortoise who was hit by a car.
- Her injury left her with spinal damage.
- She is non-releasable because she no longer has the strength in her back legs to dig a burrow. But that has not stopped her!
- Slow Mama is now Imagine Our Florida's Ambassador. She is very people-friendly and is waiting to meet you.

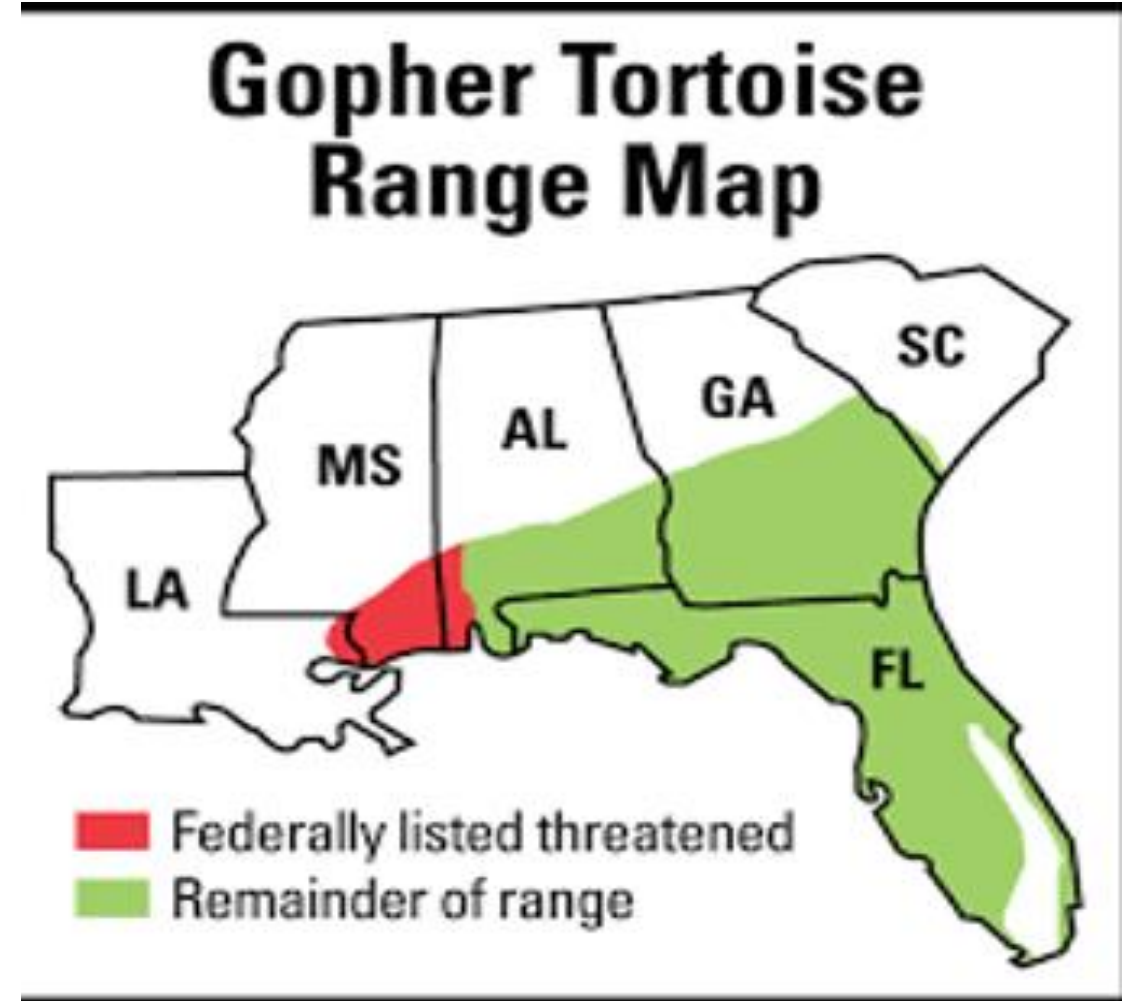


- **Slow Mama** is over 40 years old.
- She weighs about 16 lbs.
- In the wild, her diet would consist of herbaceous grasses, and low-hanging fruits and cactus plants.
- Slow Mama enjoys grasses, has her very own papaya tree, and her favorite snack is cactus pears!



Gopher Tortoise Range

- Habitats range from the southeastern Louisiana east to southern South Carolina and south to throughout Florida.
- Found in all 67 of Florida's counties
- Florida State Tortoise



Credit: US Fish and Wildlife Services

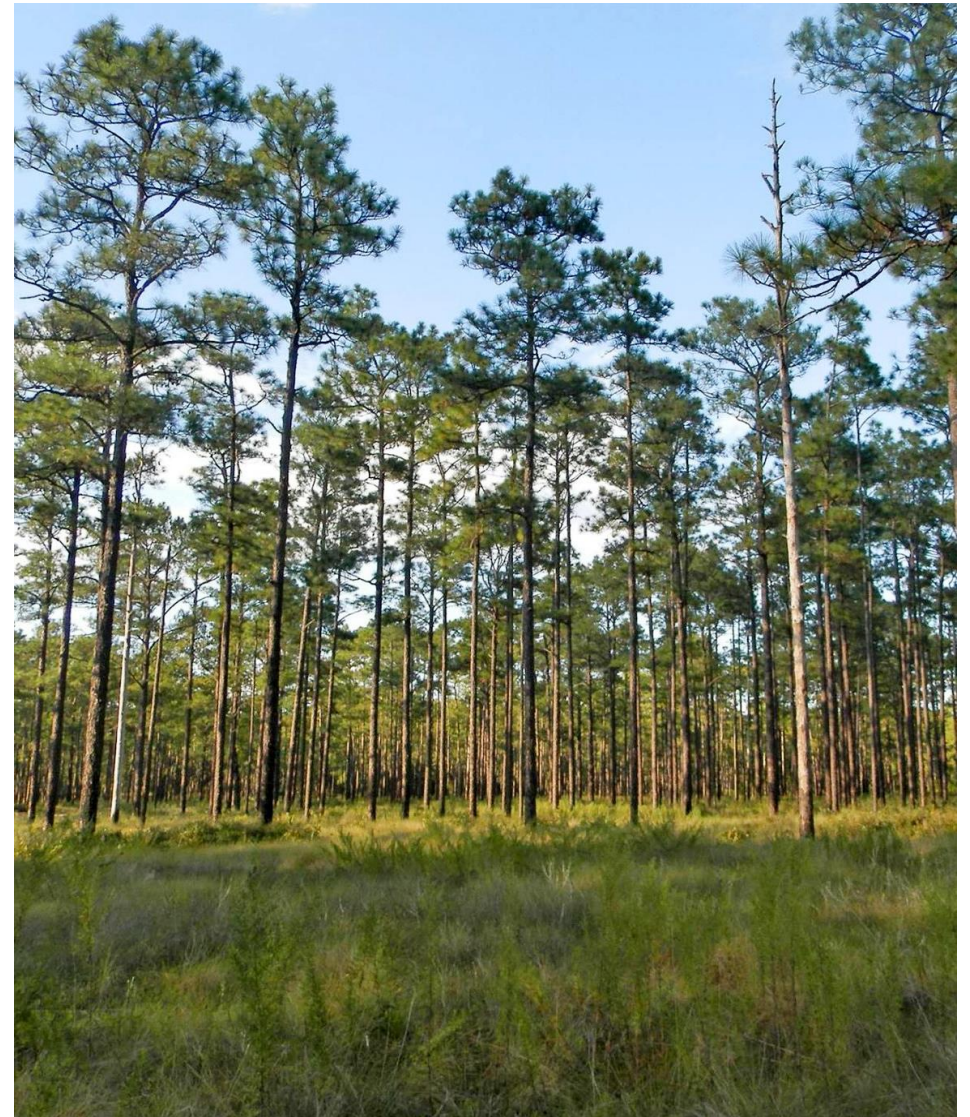
Gopher Tortoise Habitat

- Gopher tortoises thrive in habitats with well drained, sandy soils such as sandhills, xeric hammocks, coastal dunes, and scrub.
- They depend on fire to keep the understory in check so they can move about as they forage or dig burrows.
- Unfortunately, developers also prefer this type of land.

References:

https://www.fws.gov/northflorida/gophertortoise/gopher_tortoise_fact_sheet.

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



What do Gopher Tortoises Eat?

- A gopher tortoise is an herbivore whose diet consists of plants, grasses, and fruits found in the wild.
- They get all the water and nutrients they need from what they eat although they may drink from pooled water.
- Foods include broadleaf grasses, wiregrass, prickly pears, saw palmetto berries, blackberries, blueberries, gopher pear, mushrooms, and flowers.



Female vs Male



Female

- Adults at 10-21 years old
- Flat plastron (belly shell)
- Short tail
- Short gular horn



Male

- Adults at 9-12 years old
- Concave plastron
- Longer tail
- Long gular horn for fighting

Gopher Tortoise Reproduction

- Breeding season is between March and October.
- Females lay one clutch of 5-9 ping pong ball sized eggs once a year between May and July.
- Eggs are laid on the apron of the burrow or in a sunny area for warmth.
- Incubation lasts 80-110 days.
- No parental care for the hatchlings.



Predators

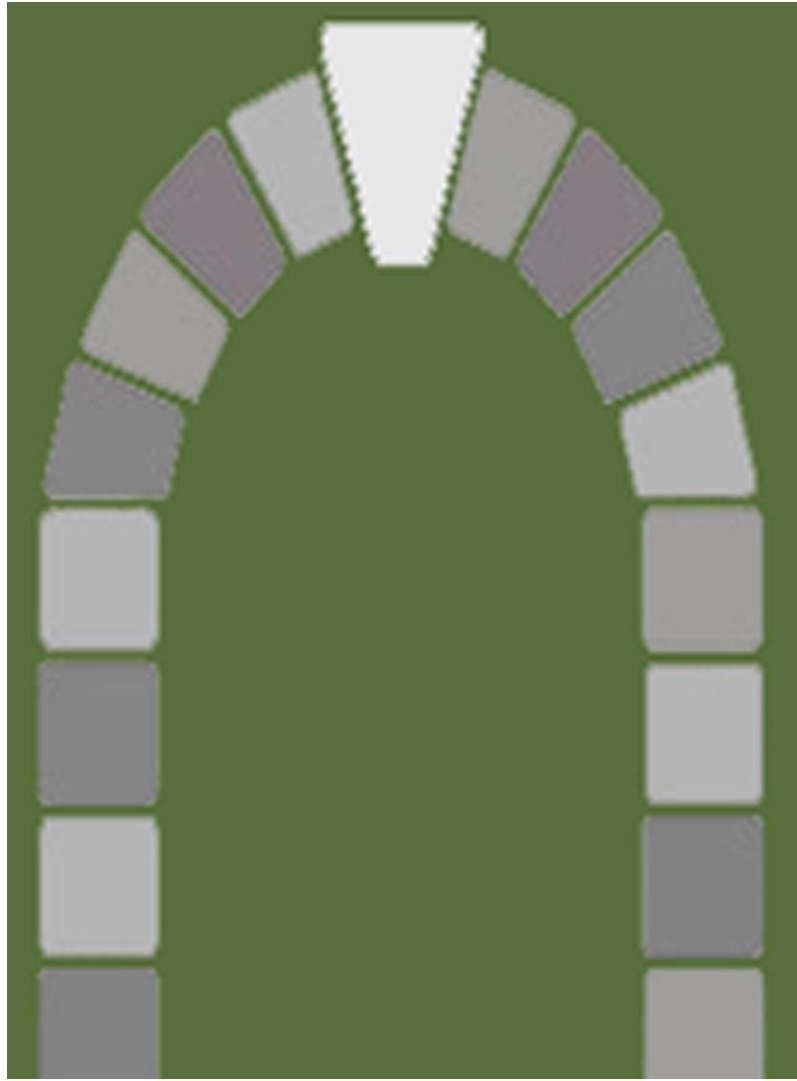
- Because gopher tortoises are so big and have a shell for protection, they are most vulnerable to predators as eggs or young hatchlings.
- Predators include skunks, armadillos, foxes, coyotes, opossums, raccoons, dogs, snakes, birds, red ants, and alligators.



Gopher Tortoise Shells

- It is the exoskeleton. The upper part is the carapace. The bottom is the plastron.
- Covered by plates made of keratin known as scutes.
- Provides protection from predators when they hide their legs, tail, and head.
- Shells are very sensitive.
- Gopher tortoises feel all that touches them!





Keystone Species

- Gopher tortoises are a keystone species and that makes them important to the health of the ecosystem.
- Gopher tortoises disperse seeds through their feces from the plants and fruits they eat.
- They create shelter for more than 350 species, known as commensals, who depend on their burrows for refuge, protection, and food.
- If a keystone is removed, the arch will collapse. When gopher tortoises are no longer present, the entire ecosystem will collapse.
- Without gopher tortoises and their burrows, the lives of many other animals would be at risk.

Gopher Tortoise Burrows

- Gopher tortoises have domed shaped entrances to accommodate their shells.
- Burrows average 15 feet long and 6-8 feet deep.
- Gopher Tortoises dig multiple burrows.
- Burrows provide shelter from predators.
- They provide protection from extreme temperatures, droughts, and fire.
- Because burrows maintain stable temperatures and humidity all year long, they provide a home where Gopher Tortoises can maintain their body temperature.



Under the Endangered Species Act, Gopher Tortoises in Florida are candidates for future listing. They are state designated as threatened.

Threats include

- Habitat loss
- Development
- Habitat fragmentation
- Herbicides
- Roads
- Pet trade
- Invasive species
- Climate change



How to Help Slow Mama's Wild Friends

- Do not disturb a gopher tortoise.
- Drive carefully.
- If you see a gopher tortoise crossing the road, carry it across the street in the direction it was headed. Do not place in water.
- Grow native plants in your yard.
- Keep pets away from tortoises and their burrows.
- Advocate for the preservation of land.
- If you see an injured Gopher Tortoise contact FWC weekdays from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. at (850) 921-1030 or after hours at (888) 404-3922





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