



# The Tortoise's Burrow

## At Hugh Taylor Birch State Park

Hugh Taylor Birch State Park  
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Volume 1, Issue 1  
Spring -May 2008

### On our favorite Tortoises

Thanks for picking up a copy of our new monthly newsletter at Birch State Park entitled the Tortoise's Burrow! Each month we will feature brief highlights on animal and plant species common to our little barrier island park as well as provide basic environmental information and tips pertinent to our little spot in southeast Florida. What better way to start off our new program by featuring information about the beloved Gopher Tortoise?

Birch State Park is proud to provide haven to a number of Gopher Tortoises (*Gopherus polyphemus*) who are easily spotted munching on grasses and prickly pear cacti—one of their favorite snacks—especially near the Beach Parking Lot. Here passer byes might be able to spot one of the many bibs, which are the sandy burrow openings common to Gopher Tortoise burrows.

Gopher Tortoises are endemic, that means native, to the southeastern part of the United States only. That means their range is no greater north than North Carolina, no greater west than Louisiana and Florida being their most southerly place of residence.

Unfortunately, as development has greatly increased throughout all of the southern states and especially in south Florida, the limited habitat that is most favorable to these wonderful creatures has been cut short. Further, developers have had a long history of complacency in regard to the wild places destroyed for use. The tragedy of entombment of Gopher Tortoises is a reality. That is, for decades now pavement and construction has been placed on top of burrows despite these living creatures residing below ground. The tortoise is known to be able to live for months before finally succumbing to starvation and dehydration. Fortunately, good citizens like you have pressed legislators to finally pass laws which fine developers for this cruel behavior.

Gopher Tortoises have been placed on the Threatened Species List, meaning that at one time they thrived with very healthy populations but are now severely cut in numbers. This not only bodes badly for the tortoise, who by its own right is a special creature, but it bodes badly for over 300 species—insects, reptiles, amphibians, rodents, etc—who take advantage of the extensive burrows that they create (which can be

over 45 feet in length and 8 feet deep and be comprised of a number of chambers and passages and bibs).

The Birch Park staff cares greatly about our few Gopher Tortoises. We number approximately 5 living in a small section on the south end of the park. We would like to remind visitors to keep to the minimum speed of 15 miles an hour on the road as to avoid accidents. We would also like to encourage never handling or feeding our precious little residents as well as never bringing new tortoises into the park, as outside reptiles can carry contagious diseases to our healthy populations.

**Book~Worm**

Recommended reading:  
[Go Green, Live Rich, David Bach](#)  
Find it at [Amazon.com](#)

### Leafy Corner

#### Gumbo Limbo



Upon a brisk walk through the thicker canopies of our park one cannot help but notice the striking and sometimes metallic red trunk of the Gumbo Limbo (*Brusera simaruba*). This subtropical tree, whose wood is very soft, has also been nicknamed the "Tourist's Tree" for its sun-burnt-like, peeling 'skin'. Some visitor's have expressed concern for the seemingly droopy and yellow appearance of this upper

canopy tree, whose leaves these days have been yellowing and even falling off. Never fear! The Gumbo is known for its amazingly regenerative qualities. In fact, one branch can be stuck into the ground to grow a whole new tree! At this time the Gumbo is only going through a Spring shedding. If one looks closely at the bare limbs they will quickly see tiny, new sprouts of leaves birthing through. The Gumbo has also recently fruited and many of the trees still bear their hard berry fruits which are not edible, but have been rumored to have had some medicinal properties discovered by the Native Americans who created a salve that helps to treat the noxious oils of poison wood and poison ivy.

### Tis the Season for Eggs!

Turtles, Iguanas, Anoles and Birds, you name it. They're nesting and laying this year's new generations. If you're lucky you'll catch Cooter turtle females scurrying out of Long Lake and burying her eggs deep in the sand which will gestate for over 6 weeks! It doesn't take long to see the non-native iguanas burrowing all over the park. They are providing extra treats these days to Crows and Raccoons

who can also be observed scavenging these s a m e nests.



Florida Slider laying eggs.

### Monthly Highlights

**Hurricane Season Begins—**Prepare! Store water, canned goods and get your batteries!

**The Heat's UP—**Bring out the water and gatoraid. Don't get caught by heat exhaustion!

#### Tidbits:

Coonties Regenerate

Seagrapes Flowering—soon to fruit.

#### Common Birds this month:

Yellow Throated Warbler

Summer Tanager

Red Winged Blackbird

Brown Pelican

Merlin—raptor

#### Ask about our Friday walks!

- **May 9, Mangroves**
- **May 16 t.b.a.**
- **May 23 t.b.a.**
- **May 30 t.b.a.**

#### • Environmental Tip of the Month

Turn your AC UP. As the summer months heat us up energy bills also climb exponentially as we keep our AC's cranked down. Energy efficiency experts recommend that thermostats be set to 74 degrees when at home, especially during the nights. Also, turn units off when we are gone during long hours of work. With climbing gas prices, your pocket-books and the environment will thank you!

Inquire about

#### FRIENDS OF BIRCH

Share your ideas and help enhance the features of our park through this wonderful volunteer, citizen's organization.