

## Eastern Coachwhip (*Coluber flagellum flagellum*) Preys on Hatchling Gopher Tortoises (*Gopherus polyphemus*)

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The varied diet of the Eastern Coachwhip (*Coluber flagellum flagellum*) has been reported to include small mammals, birds and their eggs, turtles, snakes, lizards, anurans, and insects and other arthropods (Beane, 2013). Herein, I report the second documented instance of predation on the Gopher Tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) by *C. f. flagellum*.

At 0940 on the morning of 7 November 2013, I found an adult female *C. f. flagellum* (snout–vent length [SVL] = 1422 mm; total length = 1829 mm; mass = 450 g [with prey]; GMNH 50649) basking near the mouth of a subadult *G. polyphemus* burrow near Mount Pleasant, Wayne County, Georgia (Figure 1). Just after capture, I noticed a pronounced bolus ca. two-thirds down the snake's body. Later the same day, the snake disgorged two hatchling-sized *G. polyphemus* (both ca. 4.8 cm in straight carapace length; GMNH 50663-50664) (Figure 2).

This is only the second report of *G. polyphemus* in the diet of *C. f. flagellum*. Douglass and Winegarner (1977) found the remains of a small *G. polyphemus* in the feces of a slightly larger *C. f. flagellum* (SVL = 1620 mm) captured at Archbold Biological Station, Highlands County, Florida. Other turtle species known to be consumed by *C. f. flagellum* include *Terrapene carolina* (Eastern Box Turtle) (Beane, 2013), *Caretta caretta* (Loggerhead Sea Turtle) (Arpayoglou and Martin, 2011), and *Kinosternon subrubrum* (Eastern Mud Turtle) (Hamilton and Pollack, 1956).



**Figure 1.** The adult Eastern Coachwhip that disgorged two juvenile Gopher Tortoises.

Other snakes that have been documented as predators of small Gopher Tortoises include the Eastern Indigo Snake (*Drymarchon couperi*) (Stevenson et al., 2010) and the Cottonmouth (*Agkistrodon piscivorus*) (Butler and Sowell, 1996). In fact, hatchling Gopher Tortoises are commonly eaten by Eastern Indigos (Stevenson et al., 2010). Similarly, small Texas Tortoises (*Gopherus berlandieri*) are frequently consumed by Texas Indigo Snakes (*Drymarchon melanurus erebennus*) (Werler and Dixon, 2000; Rich Kazmaier, pers. comm.).

Interestingly, there is mention in the literature of an Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake (*Crotalus adamanteus*) eating a Gopher Tortoise, by former President Theodore Roosevelt (Roosevelt, 1917). A Captain McCann, whom Roosevelt considered “an accurate and trustworthy observer,” reported that he once found a small tortoise inside a diamondback. Roosevelt was surprised, because he assumed that diamondbacks fed exclusively on birds and mammals.

In the southeastern United States, *C. f. flagellum* attains a large size (ca. 1400–1700 mm SVL), is commonly found in sandhill habitats, and, often inhabiting *G. polyphemus* burrows, is considered a “frequent commensal” (Jackson and Milstrey, 1989). Thus, one might suspect that predation on hatchling and smaller juvenile *G. polyphemus* may occur more frequently than reflected by the published literature.

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**Figure 2.** One of the juvenile Gopher Tortoises recovered from the Eastern Coachwhip (scale of ruler is in inches).

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