

CROW Case Of The Week:

Gopher Tortoise

by Emilie Alfino

Marti Repic was coming home from a brunch June 10 and was driving on Stringfellow Road, Pine Island, when she saw a gopher tortoise crossing the road. “She was trying to cross to go over to a pond on the other side of the road because we hadn’t had any rain,” Repic said. By the time she saw the tortoise, it was too late to stop and there was a line of traffic behind her. When she looked back, she saw a vehicle swerve to hit the tortoise and feels sure it was intentional. “I watched the gopher tortoise spin around like a top and I knew I had to go back and get her,” Repic said.

She found the animal bleeding with a piece of her carapace fractured and very loose. “I got a box to put her in and called CROW,” Repic said. “I worked on Sanibel so I knew what to do.”

Repic was advised to take the tortoise to Chiquita Animal Hospital, one of CROW’s drop-off points, and the tortoise arrived at CROW the next day.

“She actually was pretty lucky,” Dr. Amber McNamara said of the tortoise, who had a fracture of the bridge that brings the upper and lower shell together, as well as a quarter-size piece of shell missing. With that type of injury, a big concern is whether the membrane called the coelom has been breached because it holds all of the organs inside. The coelom is very thick and looks almost like very tough cellophane, but a car can rupture it pretty easily – and the lungs sit right beneath it. “If that membrane’s been breached, you can make things worse by trying to make things better,” Dr. Amber said. “With her, although you could see the membrane, it was intact and that was certainly in her favor.”

The tortoise didn’t want to use any of her legs when she arrived at CROW so it was hard for the staff to know whether she had any disabilities. “That’s not unusual with these guys so we try to give them time to move when they feel like it,” Dr. Amber explained. “We started her on antibiotics right away. With gopher tortoises, a full course of antibiotics is 21 days; the drug we used was administered once every three days. So like everything with the gopher tortoise, it was slower.” An advantage of this, though, is that the animal doesn’t have to be handled as much.

Pain medication was administered as well, which could be done orally, and a dressing was put on the fracture. “We used a saline bandage to clean out any debris or blood clots that may have been in there and then basically let her rest for the night,” Dr. Amber said. Gopher tortoise wounds are usually dressed with a saline bandage initially, then with silver sulfadiazene cream (SSD). The SSD step can last from days to months, depending on the wound; after that, the treatment is switched to golden yellow salve as the last step.

The patient stayed quiet, sitting under a heat lamp all tucked in for about four days, not wanting to move or eat which is not too unusual, according to Dr. Amber. As the days passed with the tortoise in this dull state, everyone remained unsure about the function of her legs.

On the fifth day, something happened – the tortoise started moving and even got to go outside. She started to eat some grass, which was a good sign. “She had very good use of all four of her legs, which was really nice because you never know about nerve damage,” Dr. Amber said.

Antibiotics were continued every three days, her bandage was changed every other day for three weeks, and her topical ointment was switched to gold-and-yellow salve that can be used without a bandage. The herbal salve’s consistency is like a thick paste. One advantage is that animals get sick of bandages, which makes it harder for them to stay calm. Eventually, the missing piece of



The woman who rescued the tortoise in this story is sure the driver hit the animal intentionally. The gopher was lucky someone was there who knew to take her to CROW.

the tortoise’s shell will fill in with something almost like scar tissue. Dr. Amber said, “It isn’t pretty, but it’s functional. I think she looks great.”

“The wound will take a long time to finish healing but she’s well on her way,” Dr. Amber explained. “I think she’ll continue to heal out in the wild as well as she could heal at CROW.”

On July 1, her rescuer Marti Repic was available to take the tortoise back to near where she was found in St. James City, her home territory. “I was able to release her and stuck her back in the palmettos,” Repic said. She put her far back from the road and near some water. “She’s a lucky tortoise,” Dr. Amber said.

This is a pretty typical story for gophers, according to Dr. Amber. CROW treats between 60 and 70 gopher tortoises every year and the main reason is they’re hit by cars. “The gophers don’t just dart out in front of traffic,” Dr. Amber added.

CROW (Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife, Inc.) is a non-profit wildlife hospital providing veterinary care for native and migratory wildlife from the Gulf Coast of Florida. The hospital accepts patients seven days a week from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mail donations to PO Box 150, Sanibel, FL 33957. Call 472-3644 or visit: www.crowclinic.org.*



CROW treats between 60 and 70 gopher tortoises every year, most suffering injuries from car accidents