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## Celebrate Gopher Tortoise Day with Friends of Split Oak - April 10th

*Festivities are on April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019 from 1-5pm at Split Oak's Main Entrance, 12175 Clapp Simms Duda Road, Orlando, FL*

NARCOOSSEE- Learn about gopher tortoises and their habitat with hands-on activities: science, arts, native plants, nature walks on the Florida National Scenic Trail at Split Oak Forest. Meet Sheldon, an ambassador gopher tortoise! Events will be taking place all afternoon from 1-5. This event is free and open to the public.

“Gopher tortoises were relocated to Split Oak Forest when their homes were destroyed elsewhere in Central Florida to make way for development,” says Valerie Anderson, President of Friends of Split Oak Forest. “Money from the now-defunct gopher tortoise entombment program was also used to purchase Split Oak Forest originally. Split Oak Forest is the perfect place to celebrate these amazing, long-lived herbivores.”



*An adult gopher tortoise walks across Split Oak Forest's Athena's Meadow toward photographer Michael Snyder*

Gopher Tortoise Day increases awareness of this fascinating creature and the need to protect its habitat. Gopher tortoises are listed Threatened by the State of Florida and are experiencing rapid habitat loss. Gopher tortoises are a keystone species of North America's longleaf pine forest, providing refuge for over 350 other species in their burrow, including native bees. Gopher Tortoise Day, April 10<sup>th</sup>, was designated by the Gopher Tortoise Council as an annual celebration of gopher tortoises.

The two major threats to gopher tortoises are habitat loss due to development and road mortality, for example, getting hit by cars. Gopher tortoises require open, dry, sandy upland habitats with abundant low-growing vegetation, such as pine flatwoods, scrub, and coastal dunes. Split Oak contains all of those habitats except coastal dunes. Gopher tortoise habitat requires regular and careful management. Gopher tortoises have coexisted with native plants and animals of Florida for centuries.

Participating organizations include:

- Pine Lily Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society
- The Florida Trail Association
- UF/IFAS Extension Osceola County
- Osceola Mom
- Swamp Girl Adventures
- Bear Warriors United

**About Friends of Split Oak Forest:** Friends of Split Oak was founded in 2018 in response to plans by the Osceola Expressway Authority to build the Osceola Parkway Extension right through Split Oak to serve Tavistock's Sunbridge development. Friends of Split Oak Forest is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit dedicated to the health and integrity of Split Oak Forest Wildlife and Environmental Area, which is a 1700-acre conservation area managed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

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