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Threatened Species and Military Training Share the Landscape at Camp Shelby

ARC and Mississippi Army National Guard Headstart Gopher Tortoises and Restore Habitats

CAMP SHELBY, MISSISSIPPI, November 19, 2026 – More than 800 young gopher tortoises have been released in the last decade at Camp Shelby Joint Forces Training Center in southern Mississippi, where conservation partners are also working to restore the longleaf pine forests the federally Threatened species depends on.

The Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy (ARC), a national nonprofit dedicated to conserving imperiled wildlife, took over the long-running program at Camp Shelby from The Nature Conservancy in July 2026. ARC is continuing the work in partnership with the Mississippi Army National Guard. The current indoor headstarting program began in 2014, with its first tortoises released in 2016.

"We made it a priority to retain the experienced team on the ground when we began managing the program," said JJ Apodaca, ARC Executive Director. "Their invaluable knowledge of the individual tortoises and the landscape gives us a strong foundation to build on."

The team spends a great deal of time in a nondescript building at Camp Shelby, which might seem an unlikely place to find more than 200 young gopher tortoises. Outside, service members from every branch of the US military train at the active installation. Inside, rows of plastic and wooden bins hold tortoises at different stages of development.

Heat and UV lamps keep the rooms warm, while fans run constantly. These tortoises were hatched from eggs collected from the wild and will spend two to five years here before they're released into suitable habitat.

By collecting the eggs and raising young tortoises in captivity, the team gives them time to grow larger and develop harder shells before release. Headstarted tortoises can reach two to three times the size of wild tortoises of the same age, making them better equipped to withstand some of the challenges they'll face in the wild, especially predation.

However, "producing more tortoises won't solve the habitat problem," ARC National Program Director José Garrido explained. Gopher tortoises need suitable habitat and continued protection.

"Good tortoise habitat usually consists of three things: an open pine tree canopy, frequent fires, and sandy soils," said Sidney Godfrey, ARC Project Manager.

At Camp Shelby, that means maintaining longleaf pine forests, which are often grassy savannas with widely spaced, older pine trees and few shrubs or smaller woody plants. Historically, these forests burned every two to three years. Frequent fires kept woody vegetation in check, allowing sunlight to reach the forest floor and promoting the grasses and other low-growing plants gopher tortoises need.

ARC works alongside the Mississippi Army National Guard and the US Forest Service on prescribed burns and other habitat management efforts. In 2026, the team and partners conducted seven burns covering almost 1,400 acres.

Longleaf restoration benefits not only gopher tortoises but also a larger community of wildlife, including the Camp Shelby burrowing crayfish, a species found nowhere else. The team also monitors Threatened black pinesnakes and surveys wetlands, so far documenting 23 amphibian species across 50 wetlands on the installation.

Gopher tortoises support many of these species, both directly and indirectly. The burrows of this keystone species provide refuge from fires and extreme temperatures, creating relatively stable conditions for other animals. Plus, as tortoises forage, they disperse plant seeds, helping shape where plants are found in the ecosystem.

"Camp Shelby is a good example of how conservation and military training can happen on the same landscape," said Apodaca. "We're glad to be working with the Mississippi Army National Guard and other partners to protect habitat for gopher tortoises and the many other species that depend on these forests and wetlands."

About Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy (ARC)
Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy, or ARC, is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit focused on identifying and conserving the highest priority places for amphibians and reptiles in the United States. We protect endangered amphibians and reptiles through a strategic, scientific, and passionate approach. We believe the conservation of amphibians, reptiles, and the habitats they depend on is vitally important. To learn more, visit ARCProtects.org.

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