

## Lightning and Fire



Florida receives the most lightning strikes in North America. Scientists have recorded over 20 million lightning strikes in the continental United States, and Florida gets more than any other state. Florida is mostly surrounded by water, with the Gulf of Mexico to the west, the Straits of Florida to the south, and the Atlantic Ocean to the east. This water is warm, which means it can be very humid in Florida throughout the year. During the hot summer season, this mix of heat and humidity creates many thunderstorms. This pattern of storms and the lightning they often bring is predictable. It is so common that Florida has been called the Lightning Capital of the World!

### **FIRE IS NATURAL**

Over billions of years, lightning and the fires lit by lightning on the ground have shaped our planet. Many plants and animals in Florida depend on fire, and they have adapted to the constant presence of fire. A plant called wiregrass is so used to fire that it germinates, or grows out of its seeds, after a fire. The bare soil that remains after a fire is a soft and fertile soil bed. The wiregrass plant uses this soil bed to put down its roots. Without regular fires, wiregrasses might be taken over by trees and other plants that grow faster and taller.

An animal in Florida that likes to eat wiregrass is the gopher tortoise. Wiregrass is a big part of a gopher tortoise's diet, so regular fires mean gopher tortoises have a regular food supply. The gopher tortoise has adapted to fire by living and digging their homes, or burrows, in the ground. They don't have to dig very deep to escape a fire's heat, but their burrows can be almost 10 feet deep. These burrows provide great protection from fire, and other animals understand this, too. Mice, frogs, and snakes have been found in burrows with a gopher tortoise, during fires. Skunks, coyotes, and owls have often been found using burrows that gopher tortoises abandon.

**FIGHT FIRE WITH FIRE**

Before people built roads and cities, a fire could just burn and extinguish naturally. Today, when lightning hits the ground in and around people's homes, fires can cause a lot of damage to the houses or buildings, so firefighters work very hard to stop them. When they aren't fighting fires, some firefighters switch jobs and light fires on purpose! Don't worry, they are burning forests and grasslands, not where people live and work. To do this, they join something called a Prescribed Fire Crew.

Prescribed Fire Crews light fires for several reasons. One reason is to protect people from wildfires, and another is to maintain the ecosystems where species have adapted to the presence of fire. Although forest fires and grassfires can cause damage when they reach where people live and work, fire is necessary for many plants and animals around the world, not just for some of Florida's plants and animals.

The fires Prescribed Fire Crews set are carefully planned with clear start-and-end points. By regularly burning parts of a forest, they prevent larger wildfires. In some ways, they are fighting fire *with* fire because regular burning keeps the amount of fuel low. This fuel can be anything found in forests, like trees, leaves, and bushes. These fires are helpful for the people that live close-by and for the plants and animals that depend on fire.