



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

One of the joys of hunting in the Florida Everglades was the dangerous game. Not necessarily the game you were seeking, it is the animals that can punch your ticket. These creatures were the venomous snakes that take up residence in the areas you walk.

Around every section of dry land in the glades, rattlesnakes resided. It was not unusual to encounter several in a day. Normally they left you alone. If you were to antagonize one, such as trying to get close for a "Kodak" moment, he would reward you by punching your one-way ticket to paradise.

The other snake that occupies real estate in the glades is the cottonmouth water moccasin. This venomous demon does not like people at all and can be very aggressive. He likes to be near water and the glades have plenty of that. Fortunately, he is not as deadly as the rattlers, but you don't want to test your mettle with one. At the very least, his bite is painful and will make you very sick for a long time.

Imagine hiking around in one of those Everglades happy hunting grounds of my past, and encountering one of the new residents there, the Burmese python. This snake is native to the jungles and grassy marshes of Southeast Asia and are among the largest snakes on earth.

In the wild, they can reach 23 feet in length, and one that is not doing a Keto diet can top 200 pounds with a girth around the middle as big as a telephone pole. While attacks on humans are quite rare, they can cause myocardial infarction by scaring the snot out of you.



I saw this 10-foot-long python in Africa last year. As far as I am concerned, he should stay in Africa. (Mark Rackay/Special to the MDP)

Invasive pythons could one day be more than Florida's problem

This species is highly effective at killing smaller animals by latching onto an animal with its teeth and then coiling around its prey, suffocating it to death.

This started in Florida when someone had them as a pet and decided they didn't want them anymore and released it into the wild. Hurricane Andrew probably caused some to escape from exotic pet owners and the zoos when the destruction allowed them to escape. However, they got there, their wild population now exceeds 10,000.

The reason an invasive species is so dangerous to the native animals. In Florida, a 2012 study showed that local raccoon populations have dropped by 99% since 1997, with the opossum population dropping 98.9% and the bobcat population dropping 87.5%. Marsh rabbits, cottontail rabbits and foxes have disappeared. Some of these animals have been regularly found in the stomachs of these oversized serpents.

Colorado has its share of invasive species, including quagga mussel, emerald ash borer beetle, northern pike, red-eared slider turtle and bullfrogs. At least we can walk around without seeing an enormous viper, right? Uh, not so fast there my friend.

A study by the University of Colorado School of Medicine sequenced the genome of the Burmese python and have discovered large numbers of rapidly evolved genes in snakes. The bottom line of the study showed the snakes have undergone incredible changes at all levels of their biology, and to have functionally evolved more than any other species. They are in fact, the crucible of evolution.

A map published by the United States Geological Survey shows the expected range of the invasive pythons by the year 2100, considering global warming models. Projections show them in at least 15 states by turn of the century. These snakes have established a healthy breeding population in

Florida in a very short time.

The map shows that pythons could pop up in Utah, Oklahoma, Kansas, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, and yes, in areas of Colorado. Now before you start selling out and moving to Siberia, consider that the map lists us as a maybe.

Pythons have a difficult time eating and digesting food when the temperatures are below 60 degrees. That makes the maps projections somewhat misleading when you consider the number of freezing days some of these states have during the winter months.

The python is unable to hibernate and that leaves them unable to tolerate the cold like our native population of snakes who all hibernate during the winter. Never say never as this species has proven their ability to adapt and evolve.

Florida has always had a problem with feral hogs. The warm and humid climate has always been ideal for these invasive

animals, and they thrive there. We used to only find them in the southern part of the state, assuming that they could not tolerate freezing temperatures. In areas farther north, such as Alabama, we never saw feral hogs several decades ago, but that is no longer the case.

Areas that never had hogs are now overrun with them. The hogs in Alabama are now not only common, but a devastating nuisance causing untold millions of dollars of damage. As of the most recent estimates, feral hogs have been reported in at least 35 states with their number exceeding 6 million, and still expanding.

Colorado has had a few problems from feral hogs over the years but Colorado Parks and Wildlife, in conjunction with the federal government, has done a great job at keeping them out. There is an old saying amongst farmers in the south about feral hogs that says, "there are two types of people in the South, those who have a problem with wild hogs, and those

who don't, yet."

There is little doubt this topic will be something discussed and studied extensively over the years, but I wouldn't panic and throw in the towel just yet. It seems unlikely the python will move into the high country unless we see major and unpredicted changes in the climate.

Nonetheless, I plan on keeping a close eye on where I step when I am in the backcountry. After all those years in the Everglades, it's an old habit I can't seem to shake.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press, Delta County Independent, and several other newspapers, as well as a feature writer for several saltwater fishing magazines. He is an avid hunter and world-class saltwater angler, who travels around the world in search of adventure and serves as a director and public information officer for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org.

Elk Creek boat ramp opens

SPECIAL TO THE MDP

The Elk Creek boat ramp on Blue Mesa Reservoir in Curecanti National Recreation Area opened Thursday morning, April 11.

Motorized and trailered watercraft launched onto Blue Mesa Reservoir must

be inspected for aquatic invasive species prior to launching. Inspection stations are available at the Elk Creek and Lake Fork boat ramps during spring hours of 7 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Boaters are encouraged to get an exit inspection to verify watercraft are clean,

drained, and dried. Boat inspections help ensure that Blue Mesa will be available for future generations to enjoy.

For more information about Blue Mesa, see the Bureau of Reclamation website at www.usbr.gov/uc/water/crsp/cs/asp.html.

East Portal Road opens

SPECIAL TO THE MDP

The East Portal Road located east of Montrose was set to open Friday, April 12.

The road, beginning at

the junction with Colorado Highway 347, provides access to the Gunnison River within the Curecanti National Recreation Area, the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National

Park, and Crystal Dam.

The East Portal Road will remain open throughout the summer and fall until snow, ice, or rockslides make it unsafe for travel.



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