

On a Mission for Python Patrol

Written by Kim Ogren, BT Contributor
April 2019

It's a fight against time as pythons evolve for survival



or the past three years, at least four times a year, my friend Kurt has made the 11-hour drive to the Everglades from northern Florida to survey and remove pythons. That's enough to meet the requirements of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's Python Removal Contractor Program.

For his trouble, which this avid hunter, outdoorsman, naturalist, and professional geologist would argue is no trouble at all, he's paid \$8.48 an hour. The rate kicks up to \$15 an hour when he surveys areas not likely to have the snakes. He can earn \$50 for removing a python up to four feet long, and \$25 more for each additional foot.

Motivations among FWC's 30 hunter-contractors vary, says Melissa Miller, the agency's python management coordinator. Some like the thrill. Some are making a living. Others are herpetologists. Many, like Kurt, do it for the Everglades.

My chance for a ride-along came in February. I kept an open mind, as the situation necessitated. Little about the hunt, in terms of my daylong participation and, in the bigger picture, ecologically, was predictable. With visions of stepping into the swamp, I had asked, "What kind of shoes should I wear?"

"Flip flops, if you want," said Kurt.

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I met up with him and fellow contractor Anne Gorden Vega at Tippy's Outpost on Tamiami Trail near the Loop Road. Anne is an environmental artist and activist from Homestead. Both are well aware of the role they play filling in data gaps in the "what to do" part of FWC's mission. They're willing to drive up and down 12 miles of a single levee road at 12 mph for eight hours straight, as we did that day on the L28, which explains why footwear wasn't an issue. They survey in "low probability" times and locations, too, for early detection of any increase in pythons' range.

As Kurt stood on the bed of Anne's truck, he held the stabilizing bar, full of optimism as he soaked up the sun, the dust, and the vista. Occasionally we came upon other teams in their pickups.

As a fisherman, I know to be friendly and then be quiet. "Looks like good weather this week." Everyone nodded.

Such was my glimpse into the subtleties of python-hunting competition. Not much later I saw the other extreme -- a truck that was outfitted with a tuna tower and heavy-duty light bars, four people onboard.

In order to survive, pythons need to eat just their own weight over the course of a full year. Yet here they're eating three meals on average every three weeks. Prior to joining FWC, Miller co-authored a 2011 paper finding that the decline of mammal populations in Everglades National Park correlates directly with the proliferation of pythons. The paper cites a decline of up to 99 percent in some small mammal populations, and raised my understanding of the chain of events unfolding before our eyes.

Kurt's perspective made me queasy. He sighed when he gazed at some roosting spoonbills. "The birds are next" he said. "The moor hens are easy pickins."

And then: "You know, panthers like to see an abundance of wildlife."

They also rapidly expand in numbers and habitat range, and can undergo what is called rapid evolution. Diversification within a species is what makes it resilient and supports its ability not to

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just survive, but to thrive.

Rapid evolution is what makes invasive exotic species so dangerous. Folks on the front lines, like Kurt and Anne, hypothesize that the pythons we were looking for survived a big die-off from the 2010 cold snap, and now contain a chromosome that protects against such temperature dips in the future.

Innovative tactics are precisely what's required in response to this real-time innovation in the wild. The FWC program gathers tons of information while we patrol: Anne's driving speed is monitored. GPS points are taken.

At night, Kurt camped in his car with the other out-of-town hunters, but not before driving 30 miles back to the closest Starbucks with wi-fi to submit his daily reports. This seems burdensome, but he doesn't see it that way. Once, he said, he took a GPS point of an invasive melaleuca tree. FWC had it removed, and he saved a tree island.

The value of the Python Removal Contractor Program is undeniable. Kurt and Anne's knowledge, work ethic, and humor, along with Miller's commitment to help citizens find ways to make a difference, revived my own commitment to get involved in local citizen science programs. This week, FWC and other agencies are kicking off a process to formalize a management plan for pythons.

Kurt believes that FWC contractors are holding the tide until science creates a solution. He sees signs of hope. "Technology should go a long way," he says, "once we figure out what that technology should be."

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