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Everglades invaders prompt collaborative snake studies

White ibis, limpkin, little blue heron and raccoon aren't just the more familiar species you would expect to find on a day trip to the Everglades. They've also become regular prey items for another increasingly visible swamp resident -- the Burmese python.

This non-native, invasive snake is making its presence known in Everglades National Park and surrounding South Florida Water Management District lands, upsetting the delicate natural balance of the nation's only River of Grass.

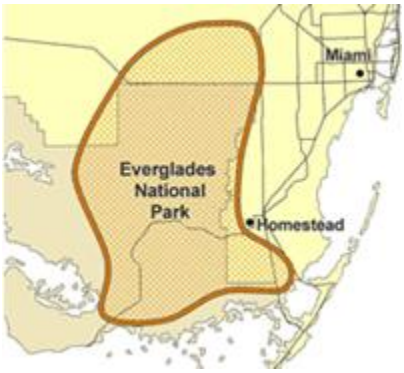

Image at the left, showing a map of where Burmese pythons have been found in Everglades National Park and other parts of south Florida, can be downloaded in higher resolution.

"They eat a wide range of prey, both in size and type," said Skip Snow, the park wildlife biologist who helps identify the stomach contents of Burmese pythons dispatched on park lands. "We've even seen a bobcat."

Other big snake invaders -- the reticulated python, common boa constrictor and ball python -- have also

been found in the Everglades, but researchers suspect that so far the Burmese pythons are the only ones breeding there. Boas are established and breeding elsewhere in South Florida at the Deering Estate, a park in Miami-Dade County.

To learn the true scope of the problem and collect data that could be used later to help eliminate these invasive species, the District is contributing over $70,000 towards joint research projects with Everglades National Park.

The general public can also help by reporting suspected python and boa constrictor sightings in Everglades National Park to a hotline number, (305) 815-2080 or (305) 242-7827.

The big snakes are most commonly spotted along the main entrance road to Everglades National Park, in the District's C-111 basin, and on other road and levee corridors, particularly on the park's eastern boundary in Miami-Dade County. The pythons are also turning up in farm fields adjacent to the park where they feed on native cotton mice.

"What we want is observations," said Snow. "We don't want anyone to attempt to catch or handle these at all. Note the date, time and location of the snake sighting and let us know."

The same advice is prudent for Miami-Dade County residents who find large snakes in their yards, neighborhoods or parks. The Miami-Dade County Fire Rescue Department Venom Response Unit can remove the unwanted critters. Call (786) 331-4444 or e-mail at mdfrantivenom@miamidade.gov

Image at the left, showing an American alligator attacking a python, can be downloaded in higher resolution.

These invasive snake species were likely released into the Everglades by people who didn't fully understand the demands of keeping reptiles as pets that can grow to be 8 to 20-feet long. Burmese pythons and reticulated pythons are native to Southeast Asia. The common boa constrictor is native to Central and South America, and the ball python is native to Central and West Africa. All have been found sporadically in the Everglades since the late 1970s, but it is suspected that the Burmese python had established breeding colonies by the mid-1990s.

Although none of these species is poisonous, they must survive by preying on native wildlife. To help determine what the big snakes were eating, the District contributed $1,000 to the University of Florida towards an ongoing research project on stomach contents done in partnership with Everglades National Park. The snakes' tendency to feed on just about anything means these non-native, invasive species could be a threat to endangered and protected birds and mammals found in the Everglades, said LeRoy Rodgers, a District scientist.

More proof of the daring eating habits of these large constrictors was published in October 2005, when a photographer captured the now-famous image of a 13-foot Burmese python that died while swallowing a six-foot alligator. The remains of both predators were found in Everglades National Park.

Last year, the District also contributed $21,000 to Florida International University for Burmese python genetics research done in cooperation with Everglades National Park. Information gleaned in the study will help researchers understand if the snakes in the park are closely related, showing whether just a few snakes helped start the population boom, or if it took many freed snakes to produce today's breeding population.

Research into the habits of these invasive snake species, the Burmese python in particular, continues.

Results of all these research efforts will guide land managers in their efforts to control and remove invasive snake species from the Everglades, said Rodgers.

Currently, the District is contributing $30,000 to University of Florida toward another research project -- this one focused on using radio transmitters to track Burmese pythons to learn more about how far they are traveling. In partnership with Davidson University, U.S. Geological Survey and Everglades National Park, the movements of four Burmese pythons within the park are being monitored, and the funding is earmarked to pay for tagging and monitoring four more of the invasive snakes.

Researchers also want to determine if tagged Burmese pythons can be effectively used as part of a broader snake control strategy. So far, researchers have been able to remove 12 snakes that were found in the vicinity of the tagged snakes.

In another pilot program, the District is spending $20,000 on experimental snake traps set up on District lands bordering the park. Scientists with the District and Everglades National Park are collaborating on the designs