

Snakes & Snails Puppy Dog Tails

Lest you think that all we need worry about are exotic pest plants, take a look below. We have snakes and snails and weevils just for starters. You'll have to read further to find the puppy dog tail.

Lygodium with Teeth

by Amy Ferriter, South Florida Water Management District

The worlds of exotic plants and exotic animals rarely cross, but they flamboyantly collided recently in Southwest Miami-Dade County. While mowing exotic cane grasses on an Everglades levee, South Florida Water Management District contractors accidentally "mowed" a handful of 8-10 foot exotic Burmese pythons (*Python molurus bivittatus*) in the tall grass. The October 2004 incident was a wake up call to water managers – all five snakes were hit in just a 3-hour period – and prompted them to reconsider vegetation management practices on the artificially high ground in the Everglades area.

News of this python incident quickly reached Skip Snow, Wildlife Biologist at Everglades National Park and he immediately made arrangements to retrieve as much of the remains as possible to continue his research on the animal in the Everglades.

Skip has been collecting data on "big snakes" in Everglades National Park for years, and was the first biologist to sound the alarm about the Burmese python. While these snakes have been found in the Park since the late 1970s, the first documented case of breeding was in 2000. Various observations by Park staff of individuals of different age groups support this unfortunate finding.

The Burmese python is native to



They grow to 6-7' long in one year and can reach a length greater than 20 feet.

This snake was found along the L-67 extension levee in Miami-Dade County in January 2005. Park wildlife biologists (Lori Oberhofer, holding the snake) spotted three of the animals from the back of a pick-up truck and acted quickly to capture them. Plant biologists that witnessed the event offered little help in capturing the snakes, saying "We're just glad our stuff doesn't move."

Southeast Asia. It is a popular pet and hatchlings can be bought for a mere \$20. They grow to 6-7' long in one year and can reach a length greater than 20 feet, quickly becoming too large for the average pet owner to maintain. Biologists fear that these cast-off animals are being released "into the woods" intentionally by irresponsible exotic pet owners. The wet-dry interface of water management district levees provides ideal habitat for the snake.

The Park and the District are now working together to develop a management plan to deal with this species. In an effort to minimize cover, water managers are increasing mowing cycles and stepping up herbicide applications on cane grass species like *Pennisetum purpureum* and *Neyraudia reynaudiana*. Bob Hill, a Miami field station employee, has been assigned to track the snake on District lands. The Park is leading the effort to collect a wide range of important python data and is launching a "Don't Let it Loose" public awareness campaign to encourage responsible pet ownership.

Park and District staff hope to complete initial ground and aerial surveys for the snake this winter – they are easiest to spot while basking in sunny spots during cold snaps – and the Park is busy training a snake-detecting beagle to help track the species.



Lori Oberhofer, Wildlife Technician, Everglades National Park is training "Python Pete" to detect pythons in brush. Skip Snow has this snake safely in the bag.