

Limpkins and Turkeys Wild

5/9/02

Katie's Landing is closed for good, so we plan to launch at the Wekiva Haven Park a mile further on, at the end of the dirt road. After years of negotiation, the state of Florida, with help from the county, has bought the six acres of riverfront, once a midden for the indigenes. Our friends Russ and Katie Moncrief will be able to retire after years of providing the finest camp along the river. I slow down at Katie's to see the place stripped bare of all the trailers and RV's, concrete pads here and there, and down under the trees what I learned to call a steam shovel (a curious phrase even in the age of steam engines). Without any official designation, Katie and Russ have been the primary riverkeepers, especially down here. Charter members of the Friends of the Wekiva, they ran the camp and launching site here for a quarter century.



I once wrote a poem about them, lost now somewhere, with the title or central theme: "with river for monastery." The measure of their dedication is the small action repeated instinctively, but consciously, over and over, as a matter of elementary connection. It has a rhythm as sure as the waves of sand on the bare bottom and the ripples of liquid on the abiding surface.

Often the canoes they rented out came with a long-handled fish net to encourage folks to do their part to clean up the river. I can hear them now, both Russ and Katie, hauling the trash out of the spent energy of each canoe and paying the children of their customers small change for each beer can and soda bottle. Inside the canyons of their voices you can always hear how the river runs, how the drought curls up the land, or the hyacinths clog up the Little Wekiva so that Russ has to go out with his boat and grind them out with the little go-devil on the back.

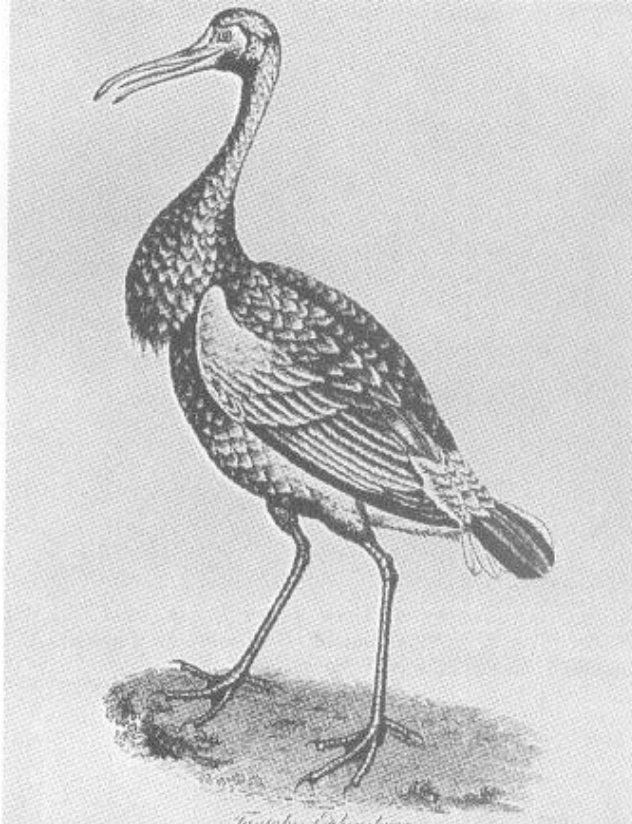
At the fish camp I arrange for the landing fees and Bill shows up with Lisa and her blue Dagger kayak on top. We load down all the goods and head out on the river. It's been four months for me since our last jaunt—an uncommon gap in our once or twice a month sipping of the river's quiet.

I am still working to comprehend the reality of silence. In my spirit the river is always as quiet as the grandest of churches, though seldom as hollow when a noise arises. The cathedral's silence is generated in part by anticipation of the grand organ, the cascading of Bach's dimensions of faith, and the magic of the choir's spiritual collective. When I think back on my ten years in the seminary, the truest part of my religion was the beautiful Gregorian chant and the spirit of God in the chords and neums of it all. My soul was deep and cool in those daily ringings of the liturgy. How could I ever imagine that when I left it, it had left me?

As Lisa and Bill move ahead of me, I listen carefully to determine what makes the noises here so quiet. It isn't the absence of sound, but the lack of voices, of sayings of any kind. The river has a different rhetoric that reaches past the ears to the heart and the soul. One could pretend it was all a motet of the finest subtlety and reach: the parula warblers, squeezing out the last note of their calls, the sudden sputtering of the fifty-five little fish on the sandy edge, the plop of a nut or branch into the water, the pair of pileated woodpeckers squawking across the interior swamp, and the osprey's high-arched call. Of course, you might want to edit out the jumbo jets leaving the Sanford airport to fly overhead or the sound of a motorboat up stream because the river's quiet is not that accidental music. It is rather the fact that most of the motion of this place and this medium has absolutely no engine noise.

The breeze is delightful here on a May day in the 90's. By how many millions of leaves does it accumulate this almost inaudible whisper? The water is ghastly low and the current quite swift, but a thousand ripples and motions all about the gliding kayak make almost no sound and even less noise. In such quiet, a sound reveals more than a sight. The manner of camouflage, of blending in, of integration of all the living elements is so splendid that the best announcement of the presence of the limpkin is when one breaks the silence with a *kurr-ee-oww*. William Bartram called the species "the crying bird" because of this loud distinctive call. The sound of a gator is even more telling, proclaimed in a basso profundo grunt or better yet in the surely-larger-than-turtle splash.

15. Bartram's drawing of the "Crying Bird": Florida Limpkin (*Aramus guarauna pictus*). (From Barton, 1818: pl. 1)



Some of the quiet of Wekiva comes from the buoyancy of the kayak. It always amazes me that the weight of the world which I carry in my body-sack down to the launching doesn't push the fiberglass right down into the sand like a stake, hammer-driven. That's why the occasional jet ski or cabin cruiser or, God and government forbid, the airboat comes as such an intrusion on the Lower Wekiva. They spill over from the expanses of the nearby St. Johns River. I love to see the people having fun, but they have too many horses under their propulsion and seem out of phase in the elbows of Wekiva's open-air silence. The kayak is a native river-car that keeps the integrity of the river's calm. Of course, when you have to get over a log at the surface, it takes a few grunts and a whinny from the horse behind the paddle. Still it fits, as well as nine feet can, inside the many circles of predation and symbiosis one can find here all at once.

Two young bare-chested men now appear and pass us without a word, going upstream, the one carefully tending the kicker while the other stands on the bow, bow-and-arrow in hand, looking intently at the brown and white bottom for the sleek lines of a gar. Their stealth and intensity of gaze completely muffle the tiny engine at the stern.

We come upon a young snowy egret, a lesson in standing-stillness. Can she hear the snails or minnows underneath? And down inside the river's watery veins, how much aquatic brain power is devoted to listening for her? I try to imagine how loud they would have to play the commercial or run the trailer of coming attractions down there to get a scooter's attention. We are fifty feet

away and still don't exist in her mind. The breeze is creating that cirrus-white thinness at the edge of her neck and back.

Now suppose I say the word *Iraq*? Can I do that in here? Can I ask why someone would tape an explosive device to his body and walk into a party to stifle the joys of life? On the Lower Wekiva, you can't hear the tank rolling along a desert highway down to the river Jordan. About all you can hear is what God might say to do about it.

The snowy has finally been startled to a walk and now seems to imitate the reddish egret's tilted swerving dance, when the head bends to one side stiffly, as the bird prances in arcs this way and that. When the kayaks finally disturb the carolling angel, she flies off down the river and floats with grace to a snag several hundred yards away. Now that's as quiet as you can go. It is not so much an unbearable lightness of being, but a sense of loft and mystery. Part of that wonder is nature's much heralded indifference, but the key is that her quiet flight comes right to me, a sharing as of a delicious pasta dish full of all the fresh legumes and fruits and nuts du jour. It is a meal: for us, to us, and from us. Each time we approach, the egret repeats this scenario, a recitative that accents our movement in tandem.

The peace of the river is partly due to the congregation moving voicelessly in and out among the cubicles and columns of trees and roots, descending at times to the liquid crypts below or moving in schools of spirits down there. It is a garden of bodied spirits untouched by words. I have often written about the play of light upon the water, but all of that photon synthesizing with its many amplifiers, the trunks and leaves and fronds, is completely without sound.

The river for me is like a gigantic Quaker meeting. We hold our hands together—gator, apple snail, Bill, Carolina wren, spring lily, and cypress tree—and listen to the sunrise and sunset in our collective unconsciousness. Our minds are 100% alert and awake, but the noosphere is gone. No great speeches, no raps or spins or headlines, no promises and no protests. All words held “in abeyance,” as Whitman would say. It is impossible not to spoil such peace with these words. Even as quiet as words can be, on a page or moving through your eyes into your mind, they are not quiet enough to equal the experience itself.

Do you say these words as you read them? I wish for now I could write them without saying them. If you can stop the words in your head from sounding, then you can take yourself all the billennia back before the Big Noise which cosmologists imagine began the whole enterprise. How special at this end of the colossal, universal noise is Wekiva, like the second before the original ground zero of creation.

After a stop off for a swim, we come around a bend and Lisa spots a pair of turkeys scratching around on a small peninsula to our left. All I can see are these little heads bobbing up and down and moving along behind a horizontal trunk and some brush. Their feet in the driest of leaves crackle sporadically like a fire, and most of the time they are out of sight behind the natural blind. We are low to the water, so our eyes remain well below their line of sight. Three kayaks--

aqua, dark blue, aqua--move slowly in tight formation around the tip of the peninsula. I catch a glimpse then, first of one, then another body. They seem like brown laundry bags hanging from a cord until a head turns sideways and I get to see the beak and red wattles of the one bird.

They turn away from us for the time it takes us to clear the promontory, when finally one spots Bill, cops a plea, and launches into flight, crossing the river and landing with a spread of fan feather that is truly magnificent. It takes a major effort to get all that laundry up and over the blind and then across the forty feet of the river itself. On the other side, safe now and moving into a stand of ferns, he calls back to his buddy several times before the other, not because he sees us, but because he believes the staggered syntax of alarm from across the way, takes heed.

Now the second wild one launches into space between twigs and branches, a dark bobbing updraft and then a quick drop of the tail, fanned out to about fifteen inches broad. Because I am the last of the three kayakers, I get to report the safe landing to my buddies. I sense I am looking at the tail end of the evolution of flight—a heavy awkward lift-off in balance with a healthy plumpness. You can't hide it. This is an expense of energy that is definitely over budget. We are happy to see that these two have escaped the hunting season, probably by staying down here in the swamp between Blackwater Creek and the Lower Wekiva State Preserve.

Today should probably be named Limpkin Day. On the way down when we saw a patchy brown and white immature white ibis, it reminded me that we don't see as many limpkins these past few years as I expect. Just now a solitary one appears on the right. They almost always go about their business, long curved beak swinging back and forth across the shallows and wetbanks to find apple snails, minnows, and other tiny creatures of the shore diet. Turning up a side channel behind an island, I see that the unusually low water leaves a vast muddy shoreline on both sides. Here another limpkin, without protection of brush, recedes toward the woods a little, but is really not paying me the slightest attention.

Egrets and herons will watch you carefully as the current closes the distance and eventually, when you enter a certain invisible zone, take evasive action. Limpkins always seem to integrate some slight evasion with persisting on the path of gathering food and measuring the muck. Back here dozens of floating little islets of earth about the size of my hands or feet dot the surface, moving ever so slowly toward the mainstream. My paddle in the shallow water turns up a beautiful brown whirlpool of earth-cloud that looks like a perfectly pulled chocolate clay pot with multiple coils of light and dark bulges.

We reach agreement on the point of return, about four miles or so below our fish camp at the Blackwater Creek confluence. Here Bill and I once feasted our eye on the muck-romp of a couple of dozen baby gators. On the return trip, a more aerobic undertaking because we promised to be back before dark, I fall behind my companions a couple of hundred yards and so miss the first part of their sighting of a pair of limpkins on the right. I can hear the chirping of a lot of other birds. Bill and Lisa paddle on when I arrive, but I stop to see what all the other bird talk is about.

The current is quite strong in here, so I go past the second limpkin and back my kayak into a tree limb to use the snag as an anchor. The tall-legged one has been working his way in my direction and, barely noticing me, comes along the shore up to the base of the snag. I grab on to the end of it, no more than five feet away. The chatter of chicks is now quite loud and I look back to see the other limpkin, mulling about on the edge of the beach, some three yards behind us. Now a bunch of chicks emerges from the brush out onto the beach. They are three or four inches high and not distinguished by long beaks or legs, just little indiscriminate puffballs of down and full of the dickens, hopping over and pecking at each other. They look to me more like ducklings, but if they were, I think they would recede from me as a clear danger and their mother would be menacing me or pretending to have some sort of broken wing. None of that here. Just a casual nibbling around while the kids tear up the peace and quiet of the neighborhood.

The only thing that would seem to justify the indifference of these two mature limpkins would be the unlikely species difference my mind is concocting. If these are little limpkins, it is my first experience, and for the life of me I can't figure out how there's any survival value in this brood. Perhaps the long beak of the limpkin mother is such a terror down here upon all predatorkind that we needn't worry. I back off my perch and float down a little to get a better glimpse, but even that doesn't frighten them and the chatter goes on as I paddle back upstream. The best part of our quiet afternoon on the Lower Wekiva is this little puzzle and the smug assurance of the poker player who knows going home that he holds a full house: limpkins and turkeys wild.