

Lower Mammals on the Backwaters



Rock Cub Spring, Seminole State Forest

3/13/98

The river is higher and wider than we have ever seen. The day is crisp and clear, the trees all sporting their best new green. A large flotilla of hyacinths with a handful of grackles picking over them floats downstream at a brisk pace, a special kind of freeway. Our plan is to "get off the river" to the newly opened back channels to discover possibly older patterns in the criss-cross tweed of the river's history.

Within a few minutes of Katie's Landing, by hooking back up under a few small trees and into the other arm, we leave the known and venture into the newly accessible unknown. In every direction, no matter how far back between the trees we scope, nothing but water shines through. No current to speak of, but a subtle flow occupies the chilly waters. Last night was in the '30's. This lower mammal is keenly feeling the loss of orientation when, moving from river to swamp, it all looks the same.

I became the lower mammal a few weeks ago when wind and storm clouds in confirmation of some predictions of severe weather made me suggest to Bill that we might be better off

turning about. He thought we should resist the instincts of the lower mammal and proceed. He was correct, but I haven't let him forget it.

Lacking the chemistry to mark my trail like a wolf, I try now to memorize important landmarks, like the sharp dead tree that sits horizontal on the left and has the lines of a musical score. As I pass it, I reverse my kayak to record what it would look like upon return. Four or five such markings later, I despair. Nothing looks the same from both sides. It's like trying to learn a long, strange alphabet backwards, so finally I give up. My friend, long used to cave-diving, thinks this is no challenge, wants to come back at night, preferably moonless, so we can **really** get lost. "What good is the wild, if you can't get lost in it," Bill muses.

Our sense of joy is five-fingered and electric, as green as the newest growth. My mind is trying to calculate the incredible amount of photosynthesis that must be occurring right here now, with a full Florida sun and all this water--the mightiest of factories silently pumping tons of water and churning out billions of greenbacks, not to mention the endless stream of flower and fruit, paper and stud-stuff.

Most of our kayaking time we keenly take the measure of the immediate obstacles: trunks, branches across the face, underwater logs, islands of watercress and hyacinth clogs. Now and then a channel opens wide and we abandon our strokes, watching the trees and water for all that floats with us. I follow an inchworm, nearly chartreuse, bunching up its slender body and stretching forward on the water's surface. We ride along together at what must seem to it like the Daytona 500.

I keep expecting a fish to make its lunch of my vision, but my bright green side-float continues to inch along the water, kicking up tiny bubbles as he goes. We swirl and slide together. Only I have to duck below the tilting branches. Does he know he's lost? That he's not even on land or leaf where he belongs? Is there any way he might adapt to the high water the way most of the trees seem to--what keeps them standing in such months of high water and wind as we have had since December? There has to be an individual in every new population that has or does something for the first time and makes a lasting change. I lose sight of the little green drag-on, after it precedes me around a log.

The succession of scenes now is an album of the finest swamp visions in deliciously bright contrasts.

Ansel Adams would be thrilled at the range of light, but stymied by the impossibility of setting his tripod. Your only chance for a steady snapshot would be to find a tree to nestle into or to bring some boards to nail a platform in. Even the business of standing long enough in the uneven crotch of a tree-trunk to make water into water is a challenge.

A steady-cam would work well in here for video recording, but the chance of losing expensive equipment would stop me. Just holding out the kayak paddle while trying to escape the overhang, I make one small miscalculation of the speed of the kayak and don't turn the paddle fast enough lengthwise, so that both sides get caught at once above my head. Suddenly I am hanging by my paddle and holding onto the kayak with my butt and legs. Bill misses this cartoon.

Here is an existence and experience, benignly precarious enough, and all but unrecordable. I imagine similar scenes of rock-climbing, cave-diving, or space-walking where nothing like the whole experience is available to the public eye. Word images in here are not much better. This is just a great place to practice samsara and commend my family, local and global, to God's graces. No matter what your story of creation, in the Lower Wekiva backwaters, in a spring-green wash of light and water where no path appears and all is both lost and found at once, you can feel almost fully a tiny part of the energy of the on-floating work of creation.

All this world is ashimmer, and in the open spaces the light bouncing off the swamp water reflects back upon the trees above in a wispy, fiery dance. Bill says it's the same on cave-walls when he dives and describes the mystical experience he found in a sacred Taino underwater site in the Caribbean. I start to read the back-river in terms of these displays and soon it emerges that the palm-frond is the best projection screen for this amazing show--their vertical fans accenting the irregular light-wave patterns flitting up through them.

We never do get lost. Near the end of our return trip, we stop to rest and talk along the thick horizontal branch of a beautiful half-fallen maple. The pattern of waves in the water proceeding from my kayak's bow is sending a regular roll of rings along the light-grey maple bark. It looks like the midsection of a tiger's body with the stripes loping stealthily forward. The longer we watch the reflected light, the

more I realize it is the same pattern of motion we have all seen creeping along a log in the fireplace. It is amazing, this cool form of fire-watching on a foot-thick river branch. If I push the paddle in the water, muddling the wave pattern, the tree begets a whole new photo-vibrancy as though I'd stirred the fire with a poker.

What does the human inch-worm know? A great deal, I think, as I study biology, read the NY Times, ponder Emerson's Man Thinking, and teach Chaucer to English majors. But always it's inch-by-inch, stroke by stroke, or just plain floating. We find our place in that simplicity, our peace.

*ME imperturbe, standing at ease in Nature,
 Master of all or mistress of all, aplomb in the midst of irrational
 things,
 Imbued as they, passive, receptive, silent as they,
 Finding my occupation, poverty, notoriety, foibles, crimes, less im-
 portant than I thought,
 Me toward the Mexican sea, or in the Mannahatta or the Tennes-
 see, or far north or inland,
 A river man, or a man of the woods or of any farm-life of these
 States or of the coast, or the lakes or Kanada,
 Me wherever my life is lived, O to be self-balanced for contingen-
 cies,
 To confront night, storms, hunger, ridicule, accidents, rebuffs, as
 the trees and animals do.*

Whitman: from "Inscriptions" *Leaves of Grass*