

The Noiseless Patient Hitchhiker



**gopher tortoise erasing a tire tread
Seminole State Forest**

6/13/10

When we park at the Blackwater Creek bridge, we meet a young father who has come to fish with his little boy, hair the color of the creek. It's nine am and the boy has taken to sitting in the truck so the father asks Bill if he has some bug spray. "I forgot to bring some and the mosquitoes or no see-ums are really bothering my son," he regrets. As Bill digs out his green and orange can, the boy emerges, wondering why the world has to have so many little critters that bite.

Two weeks ago we paddled upstream here at the creek and today we plan to go down to the bluff on the north side, just after the entrance of Sulphur Run into the Blackwater. It has been nineteen months since I paddled a kayak--a left elbow tendon was torn that eventually required surgery--so I am getting back into my kayaking slowly.

I feel like a boy from the Bronx again, remembering the first day of warmer weather after a long winter when we suddenly decide to get out bat, ball, and glove to start spring training. How do you balance the excitement of playing again against a sore arm from throwing too hard on the first day?

This morning I came a half hour early and while waiting for Bill at the gate to the Seminole State Forest, did my Tai Chi exercises. So now the deep slow breathing of the eight brocades is helping me find my balance of energy through patterns and circles of

slow arm motion. I move out across the fishing pond created by the wide bend of the river here and find the current. Just float a while. Under the bridge I make a slight bow of the head to acknowledge all the river masters who have preceded me.

The river's energy moves from sky to earth to aquifer to river and to sea in a pattern of motion that can contain whole lifetimes. The current now is quite swift (for a creek with a gradient of about a foot and a half per mile) because this year our rainy season is early and the creek is full with new water. Of course, some of the water carrying this kayak on its broad whale's back is older than I am, two months shy of the fullness of a biblical lifetime.

Without taking a stroke, I seem to be moving at about one mile per hour now, the pace of a walk that can take all of life in. With my fiberglass exoskeleton, I feel like a nine and a half foot turtle, upside down and riding on his own back, his back legs tucked in and these two bright yellow blades attached to his front feet ready to paddle. I reach out then to slow my progress just in time to observe an unusual community of waterbugs filling a narrowing pathway in the creek.

It always appears that swarms of waterbugs on the surface are a single organism, usually in the circular pattern of a roundabout that accelerates almost into an orgasm. But I'm at a loss to comprehend this set of four or five chorus lines, crossing my bow and passing each other. This is a very well choreographed maneuver, each bug following the next at a regular distance (3-5 inches) and staying in line between the two lines of traffic going the other way.

You can't see their bodies so much as the flash of morning light they create in their 2-mph wake. I can't see a path any one bug takes to head back south or north. Are they lining up by following the earth's magnetic pole? I wish I had a net to catch one and ask. I wish the boy at the bridge were here. Oh well, if wishes were kayaks, this whole creek would be full of kids.

Now I am riding straight into the early morning angles of aurora's golden tresses. A drama of feeding emerges, as two large dragonflies, golden orange with the sun shining through them, are looking like three-inch B-52's diving into the water and plucking out waterbugs or some other larval dainty on the rolling surface of glass. Another form of fly-fishing.

I pass the spot on the right where folks sometimes park to camp and fish, remembering the young couple I surprised on the last Christmas bird count, embarrassment all around. Most of the time when you're out in the SSF it feels like you are all alone with a garden full of Eden's creatures--especially on the water, once you get a quarter mile beyond the bridge.

As soon as Bill catches up, we both start to talk about how different the river looks here--so much more light and less canopy, a far thinner woods. You couldn't tell in the past how the landscape held its trees beyond a certain distance of dark forest. The four

hurricanes of 2004 were an enormous force upon the forest stands, three of their eyes actually crossing over the Wekiva basin in a single summer--Charles, Frances, and Jeanne. We have not been kayaking the Blackwater since then because for a few years the forest rangers had no time for trimming deadfall on the creek and then my elbow had me on the disabled list.

As we make our way around the many new snags, we can also see quite a few trees of different species that are standing in various stages of decomposition, attacked no doubt by the tribes of beetles and borers who can smell a stressed-out tree from far away and come to hasten its end. Perhaps they watch TV hurricane tracks like we do, but lick their awls and augurs in grateful anticipation of dispatching the wounded survivors.

As this newer, brighter creek unfolds, we see much more pennyroyal, spatterdock, and hyacinths basking in the solar energies. Bill starts spotting apple snail eggs, just as we saw upstream two weeks ago when we also encountered our first limpkin on this run. The snails deposit patches of little white gooey balls on the stems of aquatic vegetation, a promise of food for the tribes of ibis and limpkins who can use their long curlews to extract a precious river appetizer.

Still largely coasting all the way, saving my strokes and strength for the return, I rest my paddle, balanced across the cockpit. A damselfly almost immediately lands on the bright yellow blade on the right, an electric blue color pattern that is unforgettable. Just about an inch long, the two bulging eyes in front and the shoulders of the thorax behind them are neon blue, as though they had been dipped in the brightest color of our healthiest springs. The five large segments of the abdomen are black or dark, with slightly blue seams, and the tail end is as blue as the front.

Scientists actually speak of the ten segments of the damselfly's abdomen--1 and 2 are very short and 8-9-10 together also shorter than the center segments--and they get most of their identifiers from the notch at the very end which they call a tail. When I was a boy, I thought it obvious that the creature had an outsized stinger, but now I understand it is completely harmless to our species. In fact, this one might be more helpful than bug spray against the mosquito. I can't see its tiny tail as this beautiful creature, flying with invisible wings, glides slowly down the paddle toward the gunnel. As often happens, a damselfly will take a ride on my bow for major portions of a mile. I always want to use the pronoun *she*, but since I can't smell or tell the gender difference, perhaps I should avoid the issue.

I wonder if the boy at the bridge would be afraid of this blue-tipped dancer or fall in love with it as I have. No bream or bass he might catch today and certainly no catfish could boast as bright an outfit. I reach to the black grip on my paddle and she brushes across my hand before floating off into river-space, a true damsel clearly in no distress.

Bill has gone now well on ahead, but I catch up to him with his nose into the bank taking pictures for his writer's blog-site, mostly the standing-still delights of the river. It's hard to

take anything but a mind-shot of a winged dancer who lands on your hand. The advantage of the mind as camera is that it captures motion without blur and can be developed anew long after in the darkroom of memory.

We pass my second landmark for this portion of the river, a giant cypress stump left over from the golden age of Wekiva's logging in the late '30's and early '40's. My old photo of that remnant shows a weird yellow aura surrounding the edges of the five foot high trunk and today, because the river is much wider, we pass within just twenty-five feet of it. All down the river, thanks perhaps to the hurricanes, we see thriving young cypress digging deep their roots and knees, beginning the reach of a thousand years or more.

Ever since I did the research about the magnitude of the cypress logging in Wekiva's basin¹, I have tried to get a project of restoration funded, but could never find the expert who would take it on. Perhaps the hurricanes are showing us not to bother. A few more recurrences of 2004 will get rid of all the hardwood intruders who recklessly built in the bottomland and make room for an entirely new giant cypress stand to celebrate the year 4000.

Sometimes when I just coast along without making a stroke, I give up steering around the hundred sticks and branches that hang down or pop up out of the water and just move my torso aside. Today from the overhanging branches I am bemused by the light energy from many different shapes and structures of spider webs. These weavers evidently swing like Tarzan (or Jane) back and forth across the creek from anchors high above or else they crawl all the way down to the tip of the branch nearest the water.

The river is a giant circulating nest of all the insect life going from nymph stages to emerge on land and cross over into winged flight. So the spiders are just waiting for their palm pilots to ring up a breakfast tune on the xylophone of the orb or weave. Another bug has climbed out of the river molts and spreads its wings before the wind and the web.

A stick standing straight up out of the water is coming right at me now, so I bow my head to the left to let it glide by, along the right side. Suddenly from under the bow a cracking sound. The branch flies into my shoulder and snapping back again deposits a huge spider into the cockpit, landing directly into the empty cup holder in front of my seat. I flinch and scream at once (a phrase a boy should not hear) before my eyes try to see exactly what it is.

I bend my head over slowly. Never saw this one before, long black legs that have subtle pale white rings, the body small and black. I am happy I see no red anvil betokening the dangerous black widow. I don't like to just kill a spider unless I know it is lethal, so I take a piece of the broken branch and try to get it to climb on so I can let it ride the river by

¹ See Song of Wekiva, V. "Bald Cypress."

itself. It jumps around quite lively and I abandon the simple plan of capture and release. Do spiders have adrenaline too?

Fear waxes and wanes in us as we try to imagine solutions to our distressing problems. I have picked up many a spider in my kayak that made for pleasant conversation all the way back to the launch site, but for the first ten minutes now I am watching the well and contemplating murder. Finally Bill closes the gap between us and I tell him a huge eight-legged has joined me for the trip. I'm thinking now I will just let her find a resting place until we get out at the bluff for lunch. As though reading my mind, she disappears under my seat.

Now the north side of the creek broadens into swamp and the channel takes a series of sharp turns, right and then back left. I'm dancing with the waterbugs myself now, strophe and antistrophe in a Greek comedy. We used to encounter a large gator or two here on the back end of these ess curves, but perhaps they are taking their solar lounge in the backyard, out of sight. Sometimes the monsters we fear actually are more comfortable in retreat.

The flanks of the forest now open up on both sides, that bright yellow-green light filling the sky, reflecting off the low brush that stretches for a quarter mile to a tree line on the far horizon. I catch up to Bill at the entrance to Sulphur Run on the left, but we have no expectation that it could be navigable today, and so move on. A few pine trees emerge on the left and a low bank is rising, so we know the target of our trip and lunch time is near at hand. Mindful of my mysterious passenger, I try to convince Bill that perhaps because of the high water, we may be passing the bluff which is our target, but his firm memory of the place will not be deceived.

Some folks have been camping here often enough to build a seat across two low stumps and to haul in a small round table. A hefty load of charcoal from fire wood fills a four-foot circle, giving us a sense of wild home. We start to roam around the perimeter of our chosen lunch-site and find a half dozen interesting species of wildflowers, Bill taking more pics. I tell Bill the story of my spider companion, who I hope is climbing out of my half overturned kayak while we lunch. Funny now how much smaller she looks when I'm standing safely outside on firm ground than she seemed jumping around between my two bare legs. Not more than two inches long.

Bill and I munch around the site for a half hour, planning a year's worth of monthly field trips for the Friends of Wekiva--a project we hope will renew the spirits of our organization through direct engagement with the river basin. Today's trip could work great if we had some expert on damsel-, dragon-, and butterflies to help us understand the lately blooming science of insect ecology.

Insects and their predators are the most important and predominant dimension of life in and on the river-forest, not just in Wekiva of course but across the habitats of the globe. They constitute 80% of the species on earth, fitting between the water, the air, the plants, and the fauna in far more ways than any other life forms. They are the original

energy of metamorphosis, a lesson for humans in developmental adaptation. A recent textbook estimates 750,000 species of them and thanks to the internet that number is rising swiftly as science more easily spreads its news and flies away. To watch the interplay of the insect world with the rest of the ecosystem is to begin to comprehend the subtlety and sophistication of the song of creation, here and now.

I start back early as Bill explores a little further downstream. Pretty soon he catches up and leaves me in his wake as my arms are weary. I am laboring not to haul too much of my weight, against the current, and preserve the newfound utility of my left arm. Heading now west into the sun, my legs are getting far more sun than they should--I didn't think to sunscreen my shins and calves--so I get out my old mosquito shirt to cover them.

Looking ahead as I paddle, I see a spider walking or rather hopping across the water coming towards me and angling toward the shore. This comic sight sets me to wondering where my spider comrade is by now. A dog or an otter dropped off a couple of miles from home might find its way back to where I picked him up, but what does a spider do in such a case of transport? To get back home, she would have to hug the stillwater shoreline and take to land when the current switched sides. Or maybe all she has to do is wait for a favorable wind to swing from tree to tree. Can she make her web at the bluff and find the same accommodations of life or will she head downstream to the nearest facsimile of her old abode?

Sensing that the heat is beginning to slow my progress--a high of 97 today is no longer a prediction--I pull over into the shade, gulp down the rest of my water supply, pull off my cap and glasses, and throw the cold river over my head and back. It is amazing how quickly the whole exhausted body responds to a cool river bath. That and a sweet-n-salty granola bar.

Bill has waited for me at a point of water outflow just east of the bridge and we pull back into the landing, exhilarated by this new form of the river the hurricanes have created. "Funny," he says, "how much heavier these things are in return," as we both proceed slowly to load the kayaks onto our cars.

As I go to haul mine up on my right shoulder, there she is again, moving down into the back corner. I tell her she will be much happier if she gets out now and avoids the half-hour drive back to the suburbs at up to 50 mph. She only comprehends inches per second. The part of me that wanted to dispatch her to an ultimate netherworld (or a heavenly web site) is now thinking that once I get this blue capsule up on the old Buick, that will be the last of her.

Wrong again, mighty nature boob. I guess she grabbed onto the seat strap or found some crevice to hide in as the wind howled and the tie-straps groaned all the way to Maitland. I saw her again, in the cockpit still, as I unloaded my kayak and stood it up against the wall in my garage.

It is difficult to maintain a scientific attitude about this ominous and heroic journey from the river to our neighborhood. All life is a blessing, of course, but when one critter instinctually latches on to your own devious path and hangs in there, you want to call her a destiny, a sign, an assurance that you are doing the right thing, that fears of insects and other creepy biters should not be allowed to keep us from the many favorable and benign tokens in our lives. Better to carry that fear along for the ride until it becomes just another familiar friend in the garage.

I am going to go out there now and see if I can find her.

*A NOISELESS patient spider,
I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.*

*And you O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to
connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile anchor
hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.*

Whitman: *Leaves of Grass*