River Traffic
or
Notes from the Otterground

6/16/99

Every year tens of thousands of canoes and kayaks flop down into the Wekiva river. Most of them are rented from five different vendors, spaced rather evenly along the twenty-five mile mainstream. Since there are almost no public boat ramps, this means that unless you own one of the few hundred homes along the river, you must pay a landing fee to use your own canoe. This limited access feature of the water low-way has always bothered me because of my memories of free access, primarily at the route 46 bridge and the Bridge to Nowhere at the end of Miami Springs road. Of course, such tolls on the roadway keep the traffic down.

Most of the folks who cruise the Wekiva this way don't have great knowledge of the river nor experience in handling their canoes. It makes an amazing amount of gleeful commotion on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon when they all meet at the intersection of Rocks Springs Run and the river itself. Some have come a half-mile down from Wekiwa Springs and others a few hundred yards up from the Marina. They meet the King's Landing enthusiasts who have been descending ever so slightly for nine miles along a narrow and fast-moving stream with snags a million. Often by the time they get to the intersection, they have already capsized once or twice, victims of the just-slightly-below-the-surface log, lying obliquely across the path or otherwise presenting a sharp and rigid angle of declination that quickly tumbles the keel violently left or right.

The savvy river-current readers watch the water for twigs and branches that reach up like ghostly arms out of the glassy surface. It pays to imagine the buried trunks that are ready to land you into the murky, not-so-deep bed. A scream, a flying cooler, a pair of flip-flops, two air-cushions, and

perhaps even a camera bite the duckweed as bodies scramble to recover their upright position and especially the canoe. If the paddling had been vigorous before, the excitement of this sudden icy dousing, from toe to crotch to head, awakens another energy from deep within. A subtle mixture of consternation and thrill occurs whenever the unfamiliar and maybe dangerous river-depth spanks the whole party and the muck promptly gatorizes the spirit for the rest of the trip.

It matters little whether a gator is there or not when you get dumped. Think about it, though. If gators really wanted human flesh, how smart would they have to be to know where to lie in wait for these regular weekend up-endings? Indeed, the bigger ones, if they wanted to turn a canoe, could easily be the log itself that rolled the plump ones out. What can gators be thinking then of this Sunday afternoon brawl of paddlers? All day long, from their sunny banks and logs, they prefer to take the dive when the noisy canoes surprise them out of their river-bank slumbers. Some weekends the off-river opportunities for sunbathing are not that great, so this is the price gators pay on their own highway. In the canoe, however, the gator in the imagination is always greater than the one at hand.

I remember once, when preparing a group from the Adolescent Treatment Center to canoe Wekiva, I met a handsome 230-pounder named Jack. He was solid and looked like nothing on the street could ever frighten him, but out on the river professed an extraordinary amount of gator fear. When we got to the river and he was in the canoe ahead of mine, I watched him gazing with great eyes into every corner of the creek, professing he was not going to get near any gators. I laughed out loud inside because I knew he was already scooting over them as surely as he could see the logs on which they love to lie.

So when our little trip is over and we are all pulling our canoes onto the landing, one of the canoers behind us spots a medium-sized gator in the spatterdock across the spring pond. Who jumps right back into his canoe and wants to go out to see what the others have found? Jack's fear was actually his desire, not to touch and to fondle, but in some degree to stare at and flirt with. We all share something of this fatal attraction.

In horror scenes of swamp movies, the water dragons always slip into the water and pursue the fearful humans in groups of five or ten, eyes and teeth gliding across the surface with inevitable doom-tones in the musical background. Needless to say, most of those shots come from Gatorland where captive monsters grown fat on tourists provide footage of ferocity in response to their regular flesh-food.

I have seen thousands of wild gators of every size and captured many small ones at night with bare hands, but I have never seen one gator, let alone a crowd, come at a human or try to flirt with one the way that squirrels or pigeons will. Stalking small mammals and birds (hence little children unattended) is instinctive for gators, but otherwise not so. Folks who get attacked by large gators are usually a part of a foolish baiting or photo-op, and even that, considering the millions of actual encounters, is very rare.

For the most part, the great log lizards along the Wekiva don’t suffer from road rage. They know the difference between Tuesday and Sunday, between January and May. They have backwaters to swim and lakes or sloughs to reach overland, if need be, to avoid the weekend commotions and traffic jams.

So, on a Sunday afternoon, if you really want to see gators, the smart thing is to abandon the main stream and choose the backsides of all the many islands in the stream. Sometimes this requires hauling your craft through a channel closed off by considerable amounts of swamp lettuce, hyacinths, and debris. In low water seasons, such adventures end in cul-de-sacs for the canoeist who doesn't want to get out in the muck and port the canoe over the jam. The psychology of portage is different from the spill. Spillers usually try to avoid repeating their dive, but porters realize that each port has a very distinct chance of being repeated in retreat. If you find yourself, as I have, porting two or three times every quarter mile, you tend to cut your losses and return to the open river current.

Like the gator, I almost never go out on the river weekends, but recently my son Sean and his family visited, and we took two canoes out at the Marina and headed east for Shell Island, hoping the majority of the Sunday drivers would head up-stream for the springs. After ten minutes of just floating downstream, we spotted three otters in the grasses and waterweeds, a mother I guess and two little ones. Holding on to some snags across from them, we parked and watched as this other family enjoyed themselves, bobbing up and down and over each other and the various fallen trunks and branches. Upper Wekiva otters are getting pretty blasé about us canoers. More and more I find, up by the Marina, they go about their business and even will cross the stream in front of you. Their long black glossy bodies hump the water, creating tell-tale ripples in the lilies and spatterdock, and then a head will glide up and down in an instant.

We enjoyed this show of the river-dancing weasels for ten or twenty minutes before a terrible racket of five or six canoes, full of inept and half-drunk youngsters, descended on us, erasing some of the pleasure of the scene. I motioned to Sean to steer his canoe off to the right where we found a back channel to a restricted private section of Sabal Point and Sweetwater Oaks. On our way back out, we found, just south of the opening to the river, a barely perceptible, twenty-foot wide water-path that defined an island to put between us and the gunnel-bangers shouting at each others' mistakes. In here, we were invisible through the island brush.

Turning our attention to the immediate peaceful scene, we made short progress before we came to a spot where a tree fell completely across the water and caught up a whole armory of riff-raff and duckweed. We were hardly moving and I was looking beyond the log to see whether this one portage would likely do the trick, when I spotted a reflection streaking across the water. At first I figured it for a duck or other water bird that I missed in the feather, but saw reflected in the wake. Using my old binoculars, I watched for renewed activity and soon alerted the rest: "There's something feeding up ahead in the water." Pretty soon we saw that it was actually a rather large otter, all by himself, and we quietly rested our four paddles for a watch.

The bows of both canoes were snugly resting in the debris the log had trapped and we were giddy with enjoyment and whispers as our entertainer worked his way toward us, diving under a second log and moving into our immediate space. I have no doubt that he didn't see us at first, but after five or ten minutes, he came up to the other side of our log and finally popped his head up directly in our faces so that from then on we all knew each other, meeting eye to eye without exactly shaking hands.

To say that we watched him is only to say we followed ripples, bracelets of open water, the bobbing up and down of floating plantlife, with an occasional hypermergence of the narrow long neck and shiny back or the short head. The otter, my friend Jim Duby tells me, has a larger brain case than the raccoon (one of the smarter carnivores in my ken) in a smaller, sleeker head. This guy got the picture pretty quick that we would stay in our canoes safely on the other side of the log, so he went about his business.

Much to our excitement, we saw the hyacinths and other plants bobbing again on our side and then quite a commotion in the waters behind us along the bank where we could see his marvelous dark torso above the muck. Stare as we did into the water, then, we could see no sign of him and wondered if he had gone out behind us or back under the greenery in front. Suddenly he was back under the log and hoisted out onto the island with a flashing silver fish, seven inches long and as fat as my granddaughter DJ's wrist. Facing away from us, not twenty feet away, I could not actually see the fish go down, but we all heard the crunching of the meat and bone by those ever so sharp and tiny teeth. It took a considerable amount of time before the lunch was completely ground into sucrose and protein.

I'm imagining that this is the father who belongs to the two tender Wekivans upstream, but of course, there's no way to be sure. A male otter will range up and down a river fifteen miles, minding his immortality. The security of this wild creature in our presence amazes me and then he goes even further. As though pleased with his meal, he now seems more intent on engaging his guests and so he starts to swim under the fronts of both canoes. He sticks his head above the greenery, not more than a paddle's reach from where Jobie and DJ sit, as though accepting an academy award. They too are bobbing up and down in their own glee.

This mother-daughter combo is deep into animals. Jobie works as a vet's assistant and DJ is the only kid I know who can catch and hold in one hand up to five lizards at a time. I know they would love to hold this fellow, but they know better than to reach out to him. What started as a flash of light across our water path has built to a crescendo of electrical energy in all four of our bodies that our canoes can hardly contain. From the embarrassment of the river rowdies, we have been driven into this little green cove and watched the spectacular antics of the river's most hallowed mammal species.

AFTERWARD:

The black bear is indeed an important indicator species for Wekiva and certainly a flagship species that environmentalists know well how to use, but the otter is the mammal in the river while the bear mostly crosses it, belonging primarily to the uplands, the bayheads, and the hydric hammocks. The key issue here is disturbance and the human urge for direct, free, and fast transportation. On the river, human traffic is a comedy, but out on the highways the roadkill of humans and animals is a staggering tragedy. We have records of this on SR 46 where not just the bears, but thousands of other land critters and birds are dying, especially in night-time traffic.

Folks are talking again about having Orlando's beltway built over the river basin above Rock Springs and crossing over to Sanford, paralleling or replacing SR 46. By contrast, this otter's logjam is a bridge that plants and animals can use to cross this back-channel and it works well to diversify the ecology of the place, providing modest haven to fish and other critters. What would a beltway do in here?

It would be possible to build a highway with the least amount of disturbance and indeed perhaps to enhance the ecology, but it would have to be done very carefully. Fred Harden argues at our board meetings of the Friends of the Wekiva that we readily expect to build highways over water on stilts--e.g. the greenway that goes over Lake Jessup now--so why don't we build this outerbelt over the entire river basin, like the boardwalks over the swamp, so that all the land-creatures are not trapped by roads into smaller and smaller islands of evolutionary opportunity.

The other problem with any road, but especially an interstate, is the tendency of the economic imagination to make it a shopping place. If they really want "just to connect" the beltway for shopping elsewhere, then let them drop a single log that doesn't have a single place for traffic to stop between Sanford and Apopka. Let the world take notice of this unique idiocy, a wasted opportunity for growth that we could be proud of like the Grand Canyon or the Pyramids. We could feature this beltway as the extraordinary phenomenon of a landbridge over gator-mounds and otter spraints, logjams and limpkin nests. Call it the Otterbelt.

We Otter Care
Motto of The Friends of the Wekiva River, Inc.