

## Scales



Rock Springs Run State Reserve

12/05/01

Yesterday Bill and I hiked the length of the Lower Wekiva State Preserve on the north side of Route 46, just east of the river. It's the only parcel of the Wekiwa Springs State Park or the Seminole Forest not open to hunting this week. We start out in the late morning and rummage around the cabin where Deborah Shelley runs the Aquatic Preserve, but she turns out to be in Tallahassee today. We learn this from Bob Burns, a volunteer who has his little trailer plugged into her power source. Bob is quite friendly and tells us of the bears he's seen recently, wandering around the entrance to the trail system. I resist a crack about his name, but it does occur to me that I must be the only wandering Celtic bard who hasn't seen a bear yet.

Heading down the jeep path, Bill and I catch up on each other's activities and families since our last jaunt, kayaking the Lower Wekiva a few weeks back. The surprise of the day comes right away, a pair of bald eagles fooling around among the pines to the west. When we finally cut down a side path to get a full sight of them, they sit picture-perfect, next to each other on opposite stubs of branches that are long past the vision of leaves. Both white heads face east, yellow beaks sharply outlined, their sleek bodies long ago carved out of virgin night. Was it by the squeaky call I first heard that she told him to perch with her here or do they write such wishes for affinity in the tree tops, like a note on the kitchen counter to come to bed?

The sky, windy blue, blows like a flag behind them. I pull out my underwater minolta, knowing the picture will be useless without a telephoto lens to zoom across the fifty yards. No matter. I start to take this ideal pose, framing the pine snag inside two of its living sisters. It's just for the sake of recording the surface fact of it, an imperfection without the depth. But just as I go to click, they start to fly up over our heads to the north. When they move through the trees of my sight, directly over the jeep trail, I snap once and again, but we all know the picture has flown away faster than the birds themselves. How amazing then, and even now, the clarity of the mind's videographic memory, to capture and hold intact this entire scene inside the larger complex setting of a semester of three courses, a war on terrorism, our daughter's open-heart surgery, and a universe of other unfolding facts. It feels so good to have a Wednesday to "take off," as we say, to "get out" where a pair of mature eagles pose politely for our delight.

It is impossible not to take such a sight personally, as much as we hike and kayak this river basin and as seldom as we see even one eagle, usually far up in the friendly skies. I will not write a poem to romanticize the exchange between us. I will not concoct a dream vision by which, like the young native warrior, I might take on some power with its attendant fearsomeness. It is indeed a telling posture in my imagination: she slightly above, he to her left and two feet lower, both ready to birth a new world order or better yet a white buffalo to become the great hope of America's original nations. It is the child growing in Bill and me that the eagles meet, and they teach us an intensity of focus and a pursuit of our prey. We walk on down our path, rehearsing all our little stories of eagles, there and then. This is community too, our mutual being at attention.

Fairly soon Bill takes us off on a westward path he recently found that will bring us down to the river at a spot where the banks are uncharacteristically a few feet high. Most of the Lower Wekiva channels through a wide swath of swampland leading up to the St. Johns River just west of Sanford and Lake Monroe. When you're kayaking here, you always suspect such rises of the shoreline are native shell mounds, but we have never tested this particular spot from the river. We move down out of the open pine and palmetto into a hardwood regime that leads down to a small slough and then the river. All the while we can hear the unmistakable roar of an airboat, somewhere down the river. The sound fluctuates between deep, slower, straining motifs and lighter, swifter whines like a great saw grinding stumps. On my topo map this slough comes to about a hundred yards long and when we first arrive at it, I spot a turtle at the edge, five feet below us. He refuses to move at our approach into the safety of the water.

The slough is covered completely with duckweed, an ideal hideaway. The surface literally shines with that rich light green of a million tiny circles, coins of the river realm. Bill decides it must be a gopher tortoise, not to flee waterwise, and indeed its head is that thick fat knob of the upland cave-maker, but the underbelly of this guy is a fairly bright orange-yellow in my binoculars.

Still standing on the bank above the patient tortoise, my eyes are drawn to a pattern on the opposite shore, some thirty feet away. It looks like a Chinese character made out of small tree roots going two or three feet up out of the water. A momentary sense of incongruity arises in a synapse somewhere and suddenly I am thinking that the duckweed covering this pattern of roots makes no sense. The water level hasn't suddenly fallen two feet, leaving fresh green on the bank of roots. Then the fact emerges that, though completely motionless, this is a constellation of baby gators who have climbed up out of the slough and taken the form of a complicated hieroglyphic, involving six heads and six tails in several directions and overlappings. This is the vibrant, murky stuff of which the ancient Anglo-Saxons and Celts made zoomorphs in the margins of their precious manuscripts.

Using the binoculars, Bill starts to count, including other little fellows whose heads stick out slightly in the new-green water. One fellow we didn't notice at first seems frozen on a tiny log, head and torso stretched forward in a permanent pushup. How long can they do that in their morning naptime? Bill is counting up to eleven and twelve. "Oh man," I groan to Bill, "I wish I had my telephoto." The magic of this picture is abundant, but it has to stand purely as a memory. The scene makes profound and yet mysterious sense: each scale carrying its light green load of treasure up on the bank and the six year-and-a-half-olds, brothers and sisters of the muck, hauling up into a perfectly still arrangement.

We have to double-take this shot personally. Eventually one of the gators moves sleepily, to lie with his snout straight down. This changes the meaning of the glyph slightly, I reckon, from *The Bear Flies with Kindness under the Full Moon* to something like *A Serene Death Sits in the Lap of an Old Pine*. The trick with taking a good photo of this Chinese pattern of tiny green dragons would be to find a frame that reveals the scale of these teen-inch gatorlings.

I would like to be able to magnify, to paint these fellows on a grand canvas like the Martin Johnson Heade scene we could see from the pine flatwoods as Bill and I walked down here just an hour ago. We were looking down through a vast openness to a brow of cypress trees, now in brown-leaf, forming the horizon of the blue heaven and peppered occasionally with sabal palms. But these gators made out of duck weed can only achieve the scale of the horizon by a gross exaggeration. The eagles may be the custodians of our national freedom, but these new-green gators are the icons of our river community. It's all only a matter of scale. I don't even try to take the picture. It was a beautiful wedding. We were all there.

We walk along the slough until we find a place to ford and climb the opposite bank, moving through the brush to sit by the river and refresh ourselves with water and food. I want to go swimming, but soon I am really glad I didn't when the airboat from the Army Corps of Engineers comes upstream to disturb our lunch. With red ear-muffs on, our weed warrior sits high on a platform boat with that grinding windmill flashing behind him in its cage. From a large white tank and an extension of fire hose, he sprays long swatches of the shore, ostensibly to hit the hyacinths. We both cringe at the sight of the herbicide stream going far and wide, beyond and above the small patches of thick hyacinth on the far shoreline. We decide to back off our perches

in case, not expecting walk-ins from the swamp, he doesn't see us and suddenly decides to flash his toxic wand to our side.

No doubt he is carrying out a program to rid the river of this exotic plant which can choke the stream and deteriorate the aquatic habitat for many species. What are the chances, I wonder, that on old Woden's day in early December, two children of the Wekiva would come to this spot seeking a Timucuan place, at this half hour, and witness the one most raucous human activity we could have imagined. We expect to see the signs of campers here: the beer bottle stuck mouth-first into the top of the bank, the shreds of toilet paper among the leaves back out of sight, the crushed aluminum can under the saw palmetto. A peculiar kind of scat, indeed, but narrow and neat in its own way compared to the grand markings of the boatman on hyacinth patrol.

Bushwacking now from the end of the slough back to our original path, I suggest that Deborah has probably authorized this spraying. For all practical purposes, she is the state-appointed doctor for this river, working for the department of environmental protection. We both know her well from years of technical assistance she has provided to the Friends of the Wekiva of which we are board members. Her voice has a beautiful sharp edge that I have learned to build my trust on. She is one of the best examples I know of a public official with a lifelong calling to preserve the river and educate the people about it.

As human beings with intelligence we can see that both the river and the state government are really super-organisms of a sort. If you learn to think like a river, then you see that these upland forests are a part of the river system, feeding surface water and all kinds of nutrients and organisms down into the Lower Wekiva. The traffic in animals back and forth to the river is prodigious. Just as the exotic hyacinth was brought over the oceans by humans and then is kept plentiful upstream by boaters, so these residents of the preserve make their way, as Bill and I have, to the refreshing coolness of the streamside. This is the understanding Deborah carries from years of monitoring the ecology of our river basin and this particular habitat from gopher to scooter, from spring to slough. The state too is a complex system of political organizations and to be effective, Deborah has to be equally astute at the ever-changing landscape of Florida's bureaucracy.

Bill is amused by my naiveté and counters my assurance that the spraying is being done under her instructions. "Your trouble, Steve," he says with a twist, "is you're using common sense. In government it doesn't always work that way." We have a few laughs over that, but of course, WE are all the government as surely as WE are the river. Some of us may look at this 6000 acres as quality home sites for 25,000 newcomers to Florida (let's see, that's about a month's worth). On the other hand, the state has spent a hundred million in land purchases here to buffer the Wekiva from such use. However, while five or six of its agencies are working to develop multiple uses of that land, a seventh is mapping out pathways to build the last leg of the Orlando outerbelt just south of or perhaps right through here. Our local U.S. congressman is vigorously pushing at all scales of government to make it happen on his brief watch. The forces for economic growth behind government at every level seem willing to convert this territory into

the equivalent of Jacksonville. What will the democracy of the situation bring in the next decade or two?

We wander back up to our original trail, heading north and slightly east toward the St. Johns River. Crossing the small stream that flows out of Yankee Lake, where Seminole County has a water treatment plant a mile to the east, we move higher at first and the woods on the right close in on us more as we start to notice fresh bear scat, mostly small piles. This old jeep trail and these six thousand acres in general form the east-most arm of the two-pronged corridor for bears and other wildlife that connects the Ocala National Forest with the Wekiva basin. Not all legs of this animal outerbelt have been completed either, but purchasing by the state and the various counties continues. I have a deep feeling that today is the day I will spot my first Florida black bear in the wild. The path is guarded occasionally by a variety of late-year flowers, for the most part solitary among the gallberry or in small gatherings: the plentiful lavender asters, a few last blooms of the deer-tongue, and an occasional yellow-star grass.

As we push on further into new territory for us, getting closer to the point where the woods at our left defining the Lower Wekiva will meet the woods at our right representing the border of the preserve, we begin to focus again on the signs of recent bear activity. Bears cover quite a bit of ground in a day or night. I have seen the charts of the ones wearing radio collars and a robust male can be in Wekiva State Park or Seminole Forest one day and half way to the Ocala Forest in the next. That's twenty miles. On this side of the corridor, I wonder where they swim across the St. Johns to move up through to Hontoon Island, Lake Woodruff, and beyond.

We enter the hammock at the tail end of our time and strength for today, and there we find some old orange trees bearing rather sweet fruit among some live oak specimens that remind us of Grand Avenue in Deland or in the parking area of De Leon Springs. The shades under here and the green grasses are rich and beguiling to the spirit. The swamp is closing in on the left to within a few feet of the raised trail, but we can't quite see through the trees to either river here. The ground gets softer and muckier with the deep rootings of boars evident on both sides. Bill finally declares an end to our search, when we stop spotting scat, and he settles down by a log. I want to get to the point where I can see the wide savanna of the St. Johns. We can hear road traffic in the distance. So I propose to push on while he rests, but thoroughly tease him that he will be missing the chance of a lifetime. Of course, he's already seen his first bear, when making his film of the river, he and his bear biologist lured the hungry fellow with stale Krispy Kremes they got from a dumpster.

The trail now narrows and begins to offer unclear alternatives. In dry weather, ranger vehicles comb through here occasionally, but not lately. The grass gets taller as I get into more and more open terrain. I am close to the river by line of sight, waist high grasses in abundance, but no flowing river appears. Finally, faced with a long boggy path directly north and a longer east toward I-4, I imagine that either way I will soon be slogging or wading and so turn about.

One can never say that such a fine day of hiking was disappointing just because a premonition is not fulfilled. Once again I have seen no bears, but I have fully walked in their paths. My steps are little, but my mind is learning to be in tune in many dimensions. For the Florida hiker, the mind with its ingenious assortment of zoom lenses is the most important item in my backpack.



**I caught this eagle in the nest at the cemetery in Winter Park, corner of New York and Webster Avenues. Can you see the immature standing on the rim? Use the pdf magnifier to zoom into the nest.**