

Sulphur Run



10/21/99

Yesterday Bill and I loaded his kayaks into Blackwater Creek at the bridge and went downstream in high water to explore Sulphur Run. I had to duck as far over as I could to squeeze under the bridge.

As we moved quietly in the broader than usual blackwaters, I tried to figure out what makes this stretch of creek so different from the rest of the river. As we passed by some spots memorable from photos, I began to think it was the colors. You feel as though you're in a bright tunnel and the land defining the river is inside rather than outside your tunnel space. Once in a while that space broadens and the tunnel disappears, but most of the float you definitely feel you're moving down the bloodstream of a larger reality.

You may be thinking that I am trying to be Carl Sagan or Stephen Hawking, riding some cosmic wagon through outer space or something; but actually this tunnel **is** reality and time whereas the clock or computer keeps virtual time, a made-for-television simulation of the space-time continuum. Even a photograph captures some sense of the tightness of the green and brown walls through which our aqua kayaks flow, over black silk ripples.

So part of the mystery and identity of Blackwater is engulfing us in its own *intimacy*--the word Bill suggests to describe the unique quality of this part of the creek (pronounced "in-time-i-see"?). I for one am glad I checked in.

In a half hour or so we arrive at the entrance to Sulphur Run on the left. It frames the Seminole Forest high ground, a horseshoe shape of wetlands with a small flow up and over and then down to Blackwater, fed we assume by a number of small springs--one of which called Shark's Tooth we discovered earlier this year on foot. Once before we tried kayaking up here, but after passing a cattle owner's gate, were stopped by the shallow waters and the debris of many trees.

Today it is much different and for the first half-hour or so we make good progress, though much of it at sharp angles to skirt a variety of snags. Not much wildlife lingers around to witness this tug and haul, but the din of mosquitoes is remarkable--even to us swamp-rats--and so we reluctantly take out the spray can. It leaves a flowery fragrance that we carry with us and every now and then discover.

"What's that smell?"

"I think it's your bug spray, Steve!"

After the first half mile, at this water level, Sulphur Run is barely 15-30 feet wide and just about every ten yards of it, going upstream or down, has at least one fallen tree or log to scrape over, scratch through, or end run. Often a loop in the trunk allows us to lie on our backs and slip under. I use my arms on the trunk to push the kayak deeper in the water, slip my butt off the seat so my feet go to the very front of the bow, lower my shoulders into the seat hole area so only my head is above the gunnels, then leaning my head back horizontal to the canopy, I bend my head back so that my nose scrapes just under the bark. If the space proves too low and neither end of the tree allows clearance, then we have to contemplate, as the last resort, portage.

Sometimes the log is completely under water and almost perfectly horizontal to both the sandy bottom it lies in and the water surface. Now we search for the slightest indentation in the log. If it's not too thick, we back up and take a run at it, vaulting over, scraping the bottom with a long water-tempered sound that becomes a kind of comforting base to the noisy splashing and thrashing it takes us to paddle over.

When a downed tree seems to allow water at both ends, we each take a side and sometimes one chute works while the other doesn't. We try to remember that for the return trip. The number of tortuous crossings of this kind accumulates over the length of the afternoon and we are conscious that energy for the return haul will have to be equal. In actual fact, the water level can change a few centimeters during the day, so that it can be worse coming back.

Halfway up the eastern side of the run I hear the sound of a great woodpecker: tap-tap-tap-tap-tp-tp-tp-tp. The heft and the force of it have to belong to a bird the size of the pileated woodpecker, but I hear them regularly in my yard and their pounding, though persistent, is intermittent, thump-thump---thump-thump. This sounds loud and fat at first, but then tapers off at the end while increasing in frequency. It gives you the impression of a mechanical hammer on some sort of spring and at the end of the sequence the speed of the decrescendo of the tap accelerates into silence.

My exploratory mind has been hoping for a bear sighting in this remote area, but could this be even better--an ivory-billed woodpecker? Call out the troops. Fill these swampy woods with Audubon folk. Let's find this tapper. The last confirmed sighting of the ivory bill in America was just before the end of the war and so this greatest of the swampland carpenters is given up for lost.

Two years ago while looking through early editions of Mark Catesby's great collection of bird, animal, and plantlife from the Carolinas to Florida, I got a big kick out of seeing his drawing and reading his description of the ivory-billed. The prince of woodpeckers was so common in 1721 that Catesby remarks that Indians from Canada were keen to make necklaces out of the bills and came to Carolina to hunt and trade for them. In Catesby's drawing, the ivory's

bill is at least fifty percent longer and slightly fatter than the pileated's. So the chance of confusing the two on sighting is rather slim, if you get a good view of the hammer. The other distinctive feature is the prominence of white on the wings. Here we are perhaps as much as a quarter of a mile away from the mysterious sound and the woods are as thick as it gets.

My mind wanders backward now to when we first rode into the Seminole Forest from route 46. Bill and I were flustered to see the lumber trucks with large pines loaded on them from what looked like a clearcut operation of an acre of flatwoods. These are the first cuttings we have ever seen here since 1990 and they do not conform to what we heard from the Forest Service last year, at the FOWR board meeting, about the selective logging they were going to do for the health of the forest.

When I see that truckload of young trees, older than their neighbors, I begin to imagine the demise of the red-cockaded woodpecker (not here, but in old-growth pinelands across the southeast). Here is a place where in a hundred years such trees, dying a natural death and left standing, could begin to provide worthy habitat for all the wood cutters. A forest is not just a collection of logs, two-by-fours, and pine bark mulch. Each tree has the potential to develop cavities, thanks to the large families and tribes of tappers and gnawers. The pileated is now the grand arch-excavator of the forest-kind, leaving four and five inch holes which many creatures get to use.

This work of the chisel-beaks is supported by all the lightning and wind that, like Beowulf wrestling with Grendel, rip large healthy limbs from their sockets. This allows the beetles and other wood-chewers to do their carpentry. All this housing development can weaken the tree, but fortunately the feathery builders don't put all their holes in a few trees and the storms follow an arbitrary random pattern of disruption.

I understand the need for lumber from tree farms, but I can't comprehend the State of Florida spending millions to preserve the Wekiva basin and its wildlife ecology while practicing a fallen concept--the clear-cut of the whole tree--for the sake of some operating funds. In this case, we later found out that their plan is to extract the slash pine so as to restore the longleaf that was native.

But the ivory-billed in my mind is a bird who might come back if we had the habitat that it needed. Only God knows if she is altogether gone. Recently in the bayou country, a credible report of a pair has been getting much attention, but as of today no confirmations have been made. I imagine it is the extraction of cypress trees in here that has much to do with it, even though the species was in decline decades before. Henry Stoddard, the ornithologist who wrote the book on quail, lived nearby in Chuluota as a boy in the 1890's. In his *Memoir of a Naturalist* he recalls climbing to the crown of cypress trees to gather ivory-bill eggs for the handsome fee of fifty cents apiece. No small help to his poor family.

Rounding the next sharp turn, I fail to duck in time under a branch and my straw hat, companion of many years, gets thrown off the back. The stream is carrying it up against a log and it's threatening to drown there. I can't turn around or maneuver backwards easily to get it, so we move on with great reluctance and the promise that we will find it on the way back.

Gradually as the afternoon fills up, we notice the dark tannin water turning to thin orange and the water is clearer and cooler. We think we must be near a spring, perhaps even the outflow of Shark's Tooth. Excitement is building--fueled by the degree of difficulty and the possibility of

finding a new source of the marvelous Wekiva. Bill is always reminding me, from his years of diving experience, that these little boils can come and go like the woodpecker. The more experience you have of something, the more you think of it as a system, coming and going. I tend to think in my inexperience that this spring has to be the one I know from hiking and have since located on my topo map.

We look left and right for a channel of clear water to explore, but finally get to a spot where we can't paddle any further without hauling out and over a tree. Beyond that, several more obstructions loom. So we get out on opposite banks and explore on foot, hoping to see whether we are close to any upland regions or additional streams and how much clear paddling we can expect ahead.

I take the left side, bending under ten-foot sabal palms, and head straight west, hopping from log to log and hoping for higher ground. It is all soggy, but passable. I tap the palm fronds on the ground to loosen any snakes and test the ground for footing. Across the way I hear Bill marveling about the incredible amount of buttressing on some of the oldest trees.

For me the greatest wonder in here comes from the random arrays of rotten trunks, lying prostrate where the storms have thrown them. One looks like a bright orange canoe, hollowed into a powdery mesh of pulp that seems almost edible, like a giant, oblong pumpkin pie or sweet potato. The engines of recycling in this wetland forest are silently churning in full swing. A cypress stump I find completely hollowed, four to five feet high, a thin almost paper shell left from almost a century ago and inside this cavity a delicious array of webs and leaf-matter, brown and green, mold and mossy patterns on the walls.

I sometimes pack along a bow-saw to help us make our way up shallow waters, but now I feel the full pleasure of uncut woods and uncut stream-beds. That's an important measure of wilderness here, just a half-hour from the sprawling metropolis of Orlando. The deeper I go off the "trail" of the stream, the more uncertain each step becomes. This is no place for hiking. Park rangers normally build boardwalks six feet over such bottomland because the muck and leaf litter is more of a mirage than anything to step on.

Soon I have walked so far that I am wary of losing my line of return. It seems, in the geometrical simplicity of the mind, that returning to the run at the same ninety degree angle should be easy, but I know from experience of my own folly, hiking Alaska tundra and leaving my pack on a hill to explore the glacial river below, that even if you can see for miles around in unobstructed wilderness, it is impossible to recognize where exactly you came from and therefore where you must return to your kayak or pack.

You're thinking of course that Bill and I can call to each other, but you would be surprised how soon the human outcry gets muffled in these dense woods. My loud "Bill?" gets no answer now. Last month, leading a small party to the Twin Mounds which sit behind two little islands on the Wekiva mainstream, I called as loud as I could for fifteen minutes to get other canoers to come to our side of the island, but they went right past and never heard us. As the parula warbler flies, it couldn't have been more than a hundred yards. I could see glimpses of them, but they were out of earshot.

Making my way back, then, for a hundred yards or so to the run, I don't come out at a recognizable spot. I find Bill upstream so the kayaks are below us, who knows how far. Even though I tried to go straight out and straight back, I triangulated to the north. "No fool, no fun,"

they say in these parts. There is nothing straight about the run, nor to the path I could take going around so many half-grown sabals and fallen trunks and soggy patches of bog. Self-tracking is the only real help. So many creatures have it, but of all the animals, we humans have evolved through streeting and mapping into creatures who don't readily smell their own way in wild land.

Both of us now move upstream and the waters look pretty clear. I follow a little creek, hoping it's the spring's trail, but its width is too stationary and eventually it dries up into a muddy open space. To think that before I was born, men and beasts actually carried ton-loads of old-growth cypress out of here amazes me. I wish that they had practiced sustainable harvesting. Think of the scale of that when the trees could be thousands of years old: about one tree a century per acre. Still, I would like to have been part of the project of getting even one of those seniors out of here and onto some rail-bed. The map shows a tram crossing somewhere along here which we have passed without notice or just didn't quite reach.

Further up the run we come to a palm that makes a perfect hemisphere, a bridge over about fifteen feet of the run. We name it the golden arch of triumph, for the colorful epiphytes that glare in a slender shaft of sunlight. Retracing our steps back to the kayaks, we haul them forward and eventually with difficulty reach the arch and a little beyond before deciding to return rather than haul out and portage again. Perhaps if we get twenty more inches of rain, the rest of Sulphur run would open up for us. Meanwhile, a dream vision of the ivory-bill is knocking at my brain-door. The way the hammer fades is spooky, like a night with no moon, but still awash with a thin spidery whiteness, like the breath of the moon.

It was a fantasia out there, in blackwaterland, under the golden arch of triumph. I have to find a new hat.¹



Mark Catesby's drawing of an ivory-billed woodpecker from the early eighteenth century.

¹Cornell's ornithology laboratory, I found, has an actual recording of the ivory-billed on its web site, a distinct two-stroke percussion: bam-BAM and not at all the long rapid tapping we heard. But the news in 2005 is that a few sightings have been verified in a fully restored swamp in Arkansas, indicating that some of the sightings elsewhere since 1944 indicate that a restoration of the species is yet possible.