

Where's Momma

"Wow!"

Ten feet behind Bill and his stalled kayak, I look over his shoulder to see what can be causing such exclamation from my usually subdued companion. We have just entered a very shallow finger of the Blackwater Creek, right where it flows into the Lower Wekiva River. Only a bar of sand and a lot of brush and snags separate us from the river and we ourselves hardly fit in this narrow passage. To Bill's left is a twenty-foot long snag nestled in the muck that halfway down becomes water a few inches deep. In front of him, squinting with all my might where he is pointing, I see a bunch of little lifeless branches stick up out of the muck. It is a brown-black soupy moonscape and so with greenery directly on our right, it seems only a very narrow space of water will get us through and up the Blackwater.

"I can't see a thing," I answer, not knowing what to look for. His exclamations of amazement and my eye straining continue for quite a while until the identifying word is uttered: "Can't you see all the gators? There must be fifteen or twenty of 'em." Now I realize my problem. We are looking for the proverbial baby in a muck stack. I can't really get much closer. Our kayaks are already practically stern to bow, so I crane my neck and jockey myself into the muck on the left until over the log I finally spot one golden-ridged, eight-inch body curling up and down over a small branch, then the movement of several other bodies in the slurp.

Meanwhile Bill's mind--a formidable contraption, indeed--has gone back to the age of the dinosaurs and is completely detached from this world. One larger gator amid the others looks to be two feet long, but the rest all fit the range of men's shoe sizes. A few clumps of mud sticking out under the branches eventually join the general movement. Eyes do not seem to matter in this medium; this is basically a swarm of muddy blind snakes crawling over each other for no particular purpose. We are at the first stage after gator genesis. Remember reptile, thou art muck, and unto muck thou shalt retire.

Muck is the in-between substance of water and land. It accumulates in huge quantity in these swamps because of all the trapped leaf matter. It is May now and the cypress tree on our right--five feet thick--has a magnificent crown of new green, towering ninety feet above us in the grandest of sun-skies with high cirrus brush strokes. Its roots and knees prominently spread all about us, the tree grabs deep into the primeval slime, the richest of nutrient beds. The mystery of the forest, now fallen black under water, compels our reverence as we watch the many gatorlings, all now awake and in full commotion.

As Bill takes out his disposable camera for a few shots--wishing he had his camera team here that is making the documentary film on the Wekiva--my mind begins to engage the situation in terms of property rights.

I know who owns Blackwater Creek at this bend and she can't be too far away. Five minutes ago, as we edged off the Lower Wekiva, Bill reported spotting a ten-footer back to the left and going into the water. The little ones are now making a feeble grunting noise and we are both wishing we could translate it exactly. It sounds pretty clearly to me like "Mommy, help!" and I begin to back up. We are effectively cornered in here, no room to turn around and no depth to speak of. Momma will neither walk nor swim here, but simply wag that five-foot 100 lb. tail and pull those fat haunches up over the weird aqua bubbles into our laps.

Accordingly I start to urge Bill to give the babies a little space and to back off or push on through. It does seem that what accounts for our safety so far may be that the mother is ahead of us so that we might worsen our situation by getting ourselves between the mother and her brood.

Yesterday I was taking notes for a piece on property rights in nature and here we find ourselves in the squirming middle of it all. I can tell you the movement of the titles to this piece of river swamp. It belongs to the State of Florida by rights of purchase and before that by conquest. But the cypress tree and the gators have been living here in perpetuity long before; and indeed, from the gator's point of view, we are the invaders or immigrants who have entered her river system, trespassed across her property lines (this fringe of the Blackwater Creek), opened the door to her house, and are now sitting in the middle of her bathroom and nursery. Not even a safe-cracker would be in more jeopardy of the natural law. As small as these babies are, we should not be caught with our kayaks in the muddy bassinet. We've gone way beyond property to parental rights.

We joke about these things for a while, but fascination keeps Bill right in there, taking out his binoculars for a closer look. Backing up, I weigh the chance of my quickly lunging at the shallow sandbar leading down to the brush on the left and escaping into the main river. The saw grass at the edge shows this is an ideal nesting site, but I see no gator nest in there. I can see the river no more than fifty feet away, but the driveway through there is all but two inches above sand or muck.

As I take out my binoculars, the largest gatorling crawls up on the log next to Bill, not ten feet to his left and faces him. His body lacks the bright gold juvenile's markings, his shape also smoother and his head more round. He looks more like a short fat eel than any four-legged reptile. The babies crawling up there and over his tail have weird knobby heads that raise up from their thumb-thick bodies and seem awkward or not fully formed.

Imagine the 200 million year-old-brain in there,, growing by roughly the same patterns of DNA-hormone production as we all follow from muck to grave. My fear says I am not yet ready to die, but this birthplace would make a grand cemetery for one who loves Florida as much as I.

The important question is not so much who owns Blackwater Creek, but who can say, by the manner of his or her living here, that they love and care for it. The politics of property rights masks the real issue: starting from my own bedroom or nursery, how far does my love and care go? Believe me, we can't prove to a charging reptile giant how much we care about her offspring or how sorry we are we trespassed her front door.

After fifteen minutes of watching the wallow in the black-brown ooze, Bill finally picks up his paddle and decides not to push on: "Let's go back and see if we can find that ten-foot momma."

She's not to be seen at the creek mouth, but a few minutes later, heading back up stream we see on the far bank, in full sun, a shiny black-leather ten-footer--they all look alike to us--and wonder. Another great day on the river, no two even close to the same.



Mushrooms on a Log at Blackwater Creek