

Salty Eggs

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Everglades' Best Friend: EcoDogs Can Help Abate Python Problem

- by Sean Piccoli
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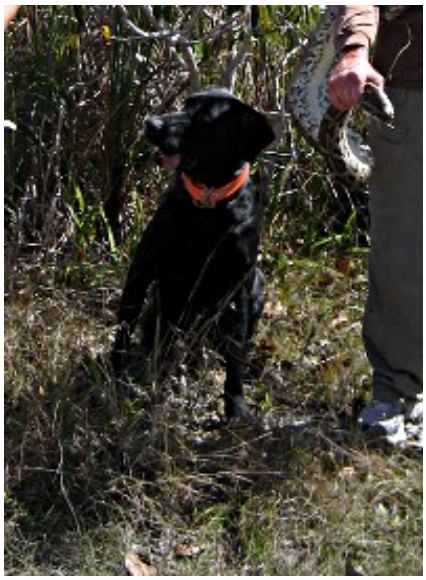

Jake is an "EcoDog" trained to find invasive pythons in Everglades National Park.

If the campaign to protect the Florida Everglades from Burmese python snakes ever needed a mascot — you know, a friendly creature to help get the word out and be a hit with kids — it could hardly do better than Jake. A handsome black Labrador retriever from an elite dog-training school, Jake recently spent a year in Florida using his superior snout and eyesight to help wildlife managers catch wild Burmese pythons, which have become an Everglades plague.

Home now in Alabama, at Auburn University's camp for "EcoDogs," Jake and canines like him are available to resume the python-tracking at which they've shown they can excel. The 'Glades minders who worked with Jake last year would love to have him back. Florida's invading reptile crisis certainly hasn't let up in his absence.

There's only one problem: Jake has no funding.



Like Jake, Ivy (pictured) was also trained to find invasive pythons for Everglades National Park.

Despite his strong showing in a pilot project that enjoyed state and federal backing, not one dollar among the millions spent annually for Everglades conservation is set aside to put more dogs on the scent of snakes.

Could that sad-eyed state of affairs change? Hopefully, says Dennis Giardina, an Everglades biologist from the state's Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission who helped monitor the canine snake-tracking venture. "But that's where we are," says Giardina, "wishing on a star."

It would cost about $75,000 a year to run an on-site program with one dog and one full-time trainer-handler making sweeps of the swamp alongside experienced snake trappers and biologists. The estimate comes from the Auburn University team that managed the study and pilot project.

Supporters of the program believe 75K is a not-unattainable sum considering the $232 million that President Obama just proposed for 'Glades restoration in his next annual budget and the $30 million the Florida House wants to spend on similar state-funded programs.

The goal is not to rid the Everglades of every last Burmese crawler. "Pythons are here as long as we're here," says Giardina. " But if we're willing to spend the money we can probably do a halfway decent job of keeping them down."

Meanwhile, the Burmese python keeps slithering up the local food chain. It's believed that in the 1970s, a few overwhelmed snake owners ditched their fast-growing house pets in Everglades National Park. Since then, this exotic eating machine, originally from the wetlands of Southeast Asia, has prospered on a diet of almost anything that moves on four legs, and has multiplied across the River of Grass.

The snake's place in Florida's bountiful invasive-species lore was cinched in 2005 with a gruesome photo of one that had tried, with mixed results, to digest an alligator. In October, Everglades Park workers killed a Burmese that had just eaten a small deer. The snake also has been spotted further west, inside one of the last refuges for the endangered Florida panther. More than 1,800 Burmese pythons have been caught in and around Everglades Park since 2002, a number "likely representing only a fraction of the total population," according to the python page on the National Park Service's Everglades website.

Official estimates of how many more are still out there range from 1,000 to 100,000. A more precise figure is, like the snake itself, elusive. Despite their hefty size — over 10 feet in length is routine — and conspicuous appetites, Burmese pythons do their lurking quietly.

"The snakes are very cryptic," says Christina Romagosa, an Auburn wildlife researcher who managed the canine tracking program.

Romagosa, who grew up in South Florida and became interested in the state's diverse animal kingdom, uses "cryptic" in the zoological sense, meaning well-camouflaged in the wild. But the obscure, hard-to-read-like-people sense seems to fit them, too. Even in early, highly controlled trials, in which two dogs looked for previously captured snakes that had been fitted with radio transmitters and placed inside a closed pen, the targets could remain virtually invisible.

"You would think that you would be able to find a 12- to 13-foot python in a plot the size of a basketball court," says the state biologist Giardina.

But Jake and a companion lab, Ivy (who was retired and adopted after the program), did prove better than their human counterparts at snake-tracking. Their best results came in open-field trials through the weedy man-made dikes and canals that crosshatch the vast swamp. All told, the dogs enabled the capture last winter and spring of 19 wild Burmese pythons, among them a very pregnant female that was poised to introduce another dozen or so hatchlings into the wild.

A twentieth python spotted by the dogs managed to evade their human handlers, says Romagosa.

Catch the dogs in action below:

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Alabama, Auburn University, Burmese python, dog, Everglades, Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Florida, Florida panther, Labrador, python, snake

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