

Tonight At Paradise Key

by DAVID O. KARRAKER

LET'S EXPLORE a bit of the Everglades tonight and see what we can find. The air is warm and not moving. Mosquito language is all that is heard from the animals, but it is early, and life has not begun to stir. Soon the barred owl will call from the hammock, to be answered by another farther away. The little squirrel tree frogs which have hidden from the sun of the day, will crawl into the moistness of evening and feed on small flying insects.

Mist curls from the black water, and the moon will not rise tonight. Something large rustles the saw grass at the right. Stand still. Maybe we can see it, or maybe it will go away. Remember, panthers have been reported from this area. It moves steadily, loudly closer and pushes a long

"... it is early, and life has not begun to stir."

Photo by A. FAWCETT, courtesy National Park Service



snout, shining eyes and dainty, naked ears through the stiff foliage. Possum.

We walk farther down the road and into the saw grass. Its blades scrape against our legs and occasionally grate our knuckles. But danger will not come from this sharp-toothed sedge, for soon we will be free of its grasp. Watch where you step. The glades are punctured and pitted by strangely shaped holes probing into the limestone beneath. Water reflects from the bottom of one of these places. On another night in a different part of the glades, I found a live leopard frog in such a hole just minutes after a large fire had swept over the area. The glades had been dry that night, and they are now. If there were a heavy rain, maybe the frogs would begin to call.

A warm wind sweeps in from the west, and the saw grass rattles softly. A toad signs his ear-splitting trill, and a long-horned grasshopper begins a lighter trill of his own.

Now we are out of the saw grass, back to the road, and walking toward the slough. Something is usually happening there. A raccoon investigates the roadside in front of us. He occasionally looks at our flashlights and finally disappears into a jumble of willows and shadows. A black-crowned night heron flies from the top of the jumble, *quawks*, and moves off into the darkness. Others *quawk* but remain hidden. Beside the ditch a tall, pale figure stands. As we sweep the light in his direction, he roars and lifts himself into the air. This is the great blue heron, the "old man" of the marshes. A flock of red-winged blackbirds awaken, call, and flutter about in the darkness. We wait quietly and soon the birds are still again.

With that, we walk on into the slough and over the boardwalk of Anhinga Trail. The southern bullfrog is there. He grunts, but the other species of frogs are quiet. Dainty baetid mayflies are whirling about, dancing in the light. A faint garble of sound arises from the end of the boardwalk. The light is flicked off and the mayflies vanish. We move silently toward the sound and toward a roost of several hundred herons and ibises. American and snowy egrets, white ibises, little blue and Louisiana herons, which arrived here during the late afternoon, appear now as dim, gray, muttering and grumbling forms scattered about on the blackness of the willows. Apparently our approach is not detected by the birds, for only an occasional call comes from the roost. A bird shifts to a new perch, and another probes his feathers. Three night herons *quawk* by in flight, and the roost is still again.

But rustling in the thick plant growth almost constantly suggest that isolated struggles for food, play, sex, and escape are happening everywhere about us. However, we are able to perceive only a smattering of the least subtle of these adventures. The wake of an alligator ripples the water, and a slender gar arches free of the surface in front of the reptile. From the safety of a dense buttonbush a gallinule cackles, and several birds move about in the big roost.

A distant owl calls, unanswered.

We proceed softly back along the boardwalk and toward the hammock. Tiny, glittering green eyes dot the roadside. These belong to spiders, which prowl jungles of a different sort. Shine the light in the ditch. See what is there. Red eyes pop forth, large and small. Alligators and frogs. Little bright bunches of white gleam from the stems of pickerel weeds. These are the clustered eggs of a certain large fresh water snail. Along the edges of the weed beds bass and bream lie motionless. The sweep of the light starts a myriad small fish into flight. They scramble from their protective maize of plant stems, and the bass and the bream are waiting.

Across the way looms the blackness of the hammock. Light spatters from a scattered handful of fireflies, and there is no wind. We enter the hammock, to tread over the thin mat which generations of dead plants have contributed as soil. It shines black and rich, but the grey limestone pokes through everywhere.

Insects howl, and a tree frog inches along a royal palm leaf, away from the light. A group of five tree snails reflect dimly from the top of the same palms. But the vast animal life of the hammock is largely cloaked by the dense sub-tropical foliage. Ferns and air plants are silhouetted along the heavy limbs of a live oak. Gumbo limbo, paradise tree, marlberry, and wild lime crowd into the trail at places where they seemed never to have been before. Lancewood is in flower somewhere near. The sweet odor is everywhere.

A shadow slides silently onto the trail. We stop and wait, and finally reach out with the light. A bobcat stares back. Seconds pass, then the animal turns and leaps into the brush.

The air is still and hot. The owl cries again, unanswered.