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Collegian**

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# You mean there's an ALLIGATOR in there?

by Dave Barry  
Syndicated Columnist

If you look at any list of great modern writers such as Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner and F. Scott Fitzgerald, you'll notice two things about them:

1. They all had editors.
2. They are all dead.

Thus we can draw the scientific conclusion that editors are fatal. I was made intensely aware of this recently when, as the direct result of an idea conceived of by my editor, I wound up flailing around up to my armpits in the Swamp of Doom.

That is not its technical name. Its technical name is the Big Cypress National Preserve, which is part of the Everglades ecosystem, an enormous, wet, nature-intensive area that at one time was considered useless, but which is now recognized as a vital ecological resource, providing Florida with an estimated 93 percent of its bloodsucking insects.

No, really, the Everglades are very important. Tragically, they have been tampered with by man, an ecological moron who is always blundering into sensitive areas and befouling

them with beer cans, used condoms, golf courses, etc. Only lately has man realized that the best thing for him to do is stay out of the Everglades. This was certainly MY policy. For years the only contact I had with the Everglades was when I drove across them on Highway 41 at a speed of 87 miles per hour, which I figured was fast enough to outrun any wildlife that might prey on motorists. Even then I occasionally had nature encounters, such as the time my car encountered a flying green bug large enough to have a business class section, which produced a windshield splat easily the size of U.S. labor Secretary Robert Reich.

So it never occurred to me to set actual foot in the Everglades until my editor, Tom Shroder, suggested that I go hiking with him out there.

"It's real interesting," he said, never once mentioning alligators, let alone poison trees.

So one Saturday morning we went. On the edge of the Everglades we stopped for supplies at a combination truck stop/sporting-goods store. I bought the survival basics: a safari-style helmet, a machete,

beef jerky, a bottle of Evian water, a snakebite kit and Certs.

(Here is an actual quotation from the snakebite kit instructions: "Misuse of the lymph constrictor...could cause gangrene which might even necessitate amputation." And this does not refer to the snake.)



I used the machete to cut the tag off the safari-style helmet, so the wildlife creatures would not think I was some easily edible swamp rookie. But I was still nervous. And I did not feel better when we met our guide, John Kalafarski, a park service ranger who is extremely knowledgeable about wildlife.

"See this tree?" He said, pointing to a tree that looked, to me, exactly like every other tree in the Everglades. "This is a poisonwood tree. You don't want to touch it."

"I'm not touching anything," I said.

Then we began our hike. At first it was fine. There was an actual path, with little signs to identify the plants. But suddenly John, having apparently brushed up against a lunaticwood tree, plunged RIGHT INTO THE SWAMP. Soon we were up to our knees in murky, festering soup, walking on one of those squishy muck bottoms, surrounded by dense growth and the smell of rotting vegetation. Deeper and deeper we went. I was fighting my way through big snarls of vines, stumbling over logs, falling into hidden holes, while up ahead, John, oblivious to the aura of menace all around us, was delivering a cheerful nonstop commentary on the flora and fauna, pointing out rare mushrooms, tree snails, etc. I wanted to scream: "TREE SNAILS? There could be GIANT SNAKES hiding in this water, and you're looking at TREE SNAILS??"

But I did not want to act like a

weenie. I saved that until the water started getting deeper, and deeper, until finally we were up to our armpits, our feet sinking in goo, and John, pointing right in front of us, said "This is an alligator hole."

"You mean there's a (bad word) ALLIGATOR in there?" I asked.

"Yes," said John, "and it's appropriate that you should use that word to describe him, because this is mating season."

"WE DON'T WANT YOUR WOMEN!" I shouted at the hole.

"That might offend him," Tom pointed out.

Fortunately we got out of there without having any important limbs chopped off. Although the certs were ruined.

When we got back onto the dry trail, I opened the beef jerky package with my machete and passed it around, and we enjoyed a pleasant sense of fellowship and accomplishment and wondered if we would need oral surgery to repair the jerky-related damage to our teeth. If you enjoy nature, I strongly recommend that you, too, take a hike in the Everglades. I'll wave to you from the car.