

Everglades python hunt draws hundreds of snake wranglers competing for \$24,000 in cash prizes



Snake wrangler Peggy Van Gorder holds a Burmese Python she captured in South Florida as part of the state's python eradication program. (Photo by Beth Koehler) more >

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By Susan Ferrechio - *The Washington Times* - Friday, August 12, 2022

OCHOPEE, Fla. — Florida has a job for you if you've got what it takes to forage through the Everglades and wrestle a 10-foot Burmese python into submission.

The state is at the tail end of its annual python challenge to capture as many pythons as possible to help prevent the invasive species from decimating the critical Everglades ecosystem.

More than 850 people from across the country and Canada registered for this year's competition and a chance to win \$24,000 in cash prizes, including the ultimate grand prize of \$10,000 for removing the most pythons in 10 days.

Competitors include dozens of people who work as professional snake-hunting contractors. Those who hunt year-round for the pythons often spend nights searching the vast, undeveloped Everglades and Big Cypress National Preserve for the camouflaged and elusive species.

The snakes, likely introduced as discarded pets, have proliferated so dramatically since the first Everglades sighting more than 40 years ago that they have wiped out nearly all the marsh rabbits, raccoons and other mammals except for rats in the 4-million-acre South Florida habitat.

Beth Koehler and Peggy Van Gorder of St. Petersburg have captured hundreds of pythons — some more than 10 feet long — since they began hunting the snakes as state contractors in 2016. The women are avid campers who love the outdoors and fishing.

By day, they run a dog-grooming business. At night, when the pythons are most active, they drive their Jeep into the Big Cypress National Preserve and the Everglades.

“We get paid minimum wage to drive around, but for each python that we catch, it’s \$50 for the first 4 feet and an additional \$25 for every additional foot,” Ms. Van Gorder said as Ms. Koehler steered their Jeep, decked out

with searchlights and state-issued tracking equipment, through the preserve.

The money barely covers the expense of the gas for the Jeep and the equipment needed to track down snakes, so they are not in it the business for the money.

“Finding a decent-sized snake is like a \$100 bill on the grass, but it’s a wash financially. It’s a privilege and an adventure, and I’m grateful to be on the clock doing it, but if somebody thinks that they’re going to sustain a lifestyle doing it — no.”

When they spot a snake, the two women wrestle it into submission, often by holding it on the ground with their bodies until the snake is drained of energy. Ms. Van Gorder said the snake is “all muscle.”

They put the live snake into a canvas bag and carry it home. They measure and weigh the snake and occasionally pinch open its jaws to swab its mouth for viruses. They either humanely euthanize the snake or turn it over alive to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission or one of the biologists at the University of Florida involved in python eradication research. Sometimes they release snakes with tracking devices installed.

If the snake looks like it has eaten something large, they cut it open.

Ms. Van Gorder said one of their captured pythons had consumed an entire adult great blue heron, an indigenous wading bird with a 6-foot wingspan.

The pythons eat just about any wildlife they can capture and are known to consume bobcats, white-tailed deer and even alligators.

Contractors have removed more than 10,000 pythons from the Everglades since the state began employing them in 2017.

Female pythons can lay clutches of 50 or more eggs each year, and nobody knows how many are in the wild.

“We don’t have a great answer for that because pythons are so hard to find,” Sarah Funk, the nonnative fish and wildlife program coordinator for the wildlife commission, told The Washington Times.

“They’re so cryptic, they’re so camouflaged. You could be standing right next to one in the Everglades environment and not even see it, and because of that part of their biology, it makes it very, very challenging for researchers to really nail down exactly how many there are out there.”

The novice participants in the python challenge are instructed to kill the snakes on site to ensure they aren’t released alive elsewhere in the state. The contractors, on the other hand, take them alive to record information to help state wildlife officials and biologists learn more about pythons’ movements, breeding habits and additional information to someday find a way to eradicate them more efficiently.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the protocol. The contractors often meet with wildlife officials over Zoom and show them what they have captured.

“Sometimes you euthanize them, do the Zoom meeting and it’s done,” Ms. Van Gorder said. “Other areas, they want us to email a biologist and they have an agreed-upon location where you put the snake in a drop box, and

that helps them with either a telemetry program or if they want to do a necropsy.”

Neither Ms. Koehler, 63, nor Ms. Van Gorder, 56, worries much about charging into shallow water to capture a large snake, even though the Everglades and Big Cypress National Preserve are loaded with alligators, whose distinctive croaking is heard at night every few feet.

Both women have been bitten by pythons, which are nonvenomous. Ms. Van Gorder once had to pluck a young alligator’s jaws from her finger while she was trying to capture a swimming python.

They think nothing of letting a heavy python wrap itself around one of their legs. Ms. Van Gorder said that “makes it a lot easier” to lug the snake up the steep and rocky levee embankments where they often search for pythons.

“In order to unwrap it, I just laid down and rolled the opposite way,” Ms. Van Gorder said about one recent encounter.

The snakes constrict and can be difficult to remove.

“It is not optimal to have it wrap around you because it is difficult to get it off, but every once in a while, to get up the levee, it’s going to happen,” Ms. Koehler said.

Neither of them wears gloves or carries a weapon. It’s just bare hands, flashlights and a lot of self-taught knowledge about how to capture a Burmese python.

One of the most important rules, Ms. Koehler said, is to grab the snake by the top third of its body; otherwise, it will escape or bite.

“If you don’t control the top third of the python, you don’t control the python,” Ms. Koehler said.

In the seven years that they have been chasing pythons, only two have managed to slither away.

Days before the start of the contest, Rollins College student Joshua Laquis and a group of friends captured a python nearly 18 feet long after spotting it crossing U.S. 41 near Everglades National Forest. It doesn’t qualify for the cash prize because the contest had not officially started.

The 10-day python challenge began on Aug. 5.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission said the participants in the challenge last year bagged 223 snakes, including a 15-foot, 9-inch python trapped by Brandon Call, a science teacher who works for the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind. He won a \$1,500 prize for capturing the longest snake.

Ms. Funk said the python challenge is just one of many approaches wildlife officials are using to eradicate the pythons from the Everglades because no single method has succeeded.

Some of the other tools are “scout” snakes trapped by contractors. They are fitted with transmitters and released back into the Everglades. Wildlife officials also have started using detector dogs and infrared cameras.

“We don’t have the one control tool that works perfectly,” Ms. Funk said. “Part of that, of course, is awareness and outreach and public support for what managers are doing. That’s where the python challenge comes into

play. It's all about awareness, getting the word out on this really important conservation issue and also simultaneously offering the public an opportunity to get involved in invasive species control in Everglades restoration. So it's a really cool, unique approach to get so many people involved every year."

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