

The Ancient Itch



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A LARGE GREEN TROPICAL IGUANA ran across Stringfellow Road out here on Pine Island yesterday, and I had to stop and look twice to see what it was.

Was it really an iguana? Here in Southwest Florida?

The reality is that much of the region is running wild with loopy lizards and

other exotic runaway reptiles. We now have boas in the Everglades and monitor lizards at the north end of Cape Coral and even in the mangrove fringes of Pine Island. I saw one the other day and did my usual double take: Was it, is it, where am I?

What author Paul Theroux said while kayaking here applies: "You can travel for days among the low and misleading islands on the outer reaches of Charlotte Harbor and never see a golfer, which I suppose is one definition of wilderness."

Some would agree with my father-in-law, an avid golfer, who says, "You have it here, the wilderness. But what are you going to do with it?" But for me, just having that wilderness around me, a subtropical fantasy that is nonetheless our reality, is a great comfort; and I don't always know, or care about, the reason why.

Some of us hear the call of the wilderness just by glancing out a condo window at a panoramic view of the water. For others, it may be seeing a footloose iguana you thought belonged in Ixtapa or Cozumel. Here the creature seems a bit out of context, and yet Florida has always had an eccentric incongruity about it, a feeling that there

are things growing here—even under your own skin—that don't belong. I call it the ancient itch.

When I first moved here, I had it bad. Well, to be perfectly frank, it sent me—this misplaced itch—to a dermatologist, who, believe it or not, said I had a case of "bad sand." I could not define that. Neither could my dermatologist. He did say, however, that it was not something you got in Kansas. And he gave me some cream that had cortisone in it.

My skin cleared up, but my primordial itchiness never went away. It's the thing under the skin that makes me love it here. I used to think low tide smelled

bad—what did I know; I came from Santa Fe, where the tide had gone away a million years before I got there. Now I take a deep breath of that same mucky elixir and I get the old itch. “You gotta love it,” my crab-happy neighbor says, “‘cause there ain’t nothin’ like it.” I’ve heard it put differently. I heard a guy getting off the plane say, “Ahm fixin’ t’breathe some air that’s thick enough to spread on toast.”

Alden Pines Golf Course on Pine Island is beautified with homes, but also has remarkable animal populations that confound our more squeamish visitors. Some don’t enjoy the sight of an Eastern diamondback rattler coiled up in a bunker. And others don’t appreciate watching a house cat lifted off its hind feet by a predatory eagle.

A few days ago, a friend invited us over to her house, and while we were sipping a little rum on the lanai, a finch flew into the living room. Annoyed that the finch wouldn’t leave, our friend began to clap loudly. “What’s that for?” I asked. She answered, “I want the bird to fly out of here.” I asked where their ladder was, got it, and climbed up to the highest window in the house where the poor finch was fluttering against the glass to escape.

I reached out and the bird was in my palm, its vibrant little body humming with sentient life, droning like a bumblebee with the electrical impulse of the wilderness. When I set it free by opening my palm, I remembered what a friend in Jamaica once told me: “A bird at sea has a wind vibration, a bird on land has a land vibration.” This little golden finch still had its wind vibration, and I felt it seeping through my body and humming along with my heart.

Thankfully, it’s still here, the wilderness. But can we keep from clapping to make it go away? I hope we can, and that we can see it reminds us of who we really are. That we came, as Carl Sandburg said, out of the wilderness, and it is to the wilderness we shall one day return.

I, for one, want the wild nature of the water in me until the day I die. “Life is good,” quotes an Armenian poet friend of mine, “unless you weaken.” He also quotes his favorite Armenian proverb: “Making a living is like taking food from the tiger’s mouth.” Every once in a while, no matter what our age or financial position, we ought to gamble on a brief tussle

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in the woods or in the water—with something larger than ourselves.

I met a 97-year-old named Murph the other day who told me his girlfriend had forbidden him to swim in the Gulf anymore. “Are you going to follow her orders?” I asked him. He chuckled, then said, “When I built my house back in the 1940s, A.J. Edwards—yes, the man himself—told me not to invest in Florida real estate. I just sold my last house for a million dollars, and they had to tear it down because it was too small. And if A.J. couldn’t drive me off the sand, how’s my girlfriend going to drag me off the surf?”

I told him that I used to go for a sharky dip off Casey Key, north of Venice, in a weird little spot where I always got bumped by some hard, prehensile snouts. “It wasn’t sharks,” I told him, “but some finny fellows running from them.”

“I know exactly where that is,” he said. “You get hit by a bunch of mullet making their fast runs to the south. Once I saw something torpedo-shaped chasing them, and it went right past me. I guess I’m too old and tough to be tasty.”

A couple days later, I found myself on Cayo Costa. The last thing on my mind that day was a wilderness reckoning, but it happened, as it often does, when you’re not expecting it.

I was jogging across the width of the island in the late afternoon by myself, when I almost ran into a black feral sow and three little piglets with twitchy tails.

There was barely time for me to throw on my Adidas brakes. Grinding to a halt, I stopped just in front of that monstrous, unmoving mama pig. A dark mist of flies swarmed around her head. She grunted. The sweat poured down my neck and trickled into my shorts. My heart was beating loudly.

Funny how things happen. You imagine you’re at peace with nature, and then—*bam*—she’s right there in your face. And her face doesn’t look friendly. It looks baleful.

The first thing you do in such a situation is get calm. And then, if you’re me, a litany flows through your brain while you stand there sweating in the hot sun being examined by two mean little pig eyes in a vast hulk of hair and fat.

“There is a hog in me...a snout and belly...a

machinery for eating and grunting . . . a machinery for sleeping satisfied in the sun—I got this, too, from the wilderness, and the wilderness will not let it go.”

Was it so unlike me, who almost ran into it? This grand thing of flank and snout and tusk and hoof?

I sat down on my haunches, and took the weight off my mind and my body. The great sow cast a shadow over me and the long afternoon of golden green. I regarded her; she regarded me. Centuries of nut eating, berry nibbling, lizard munching, bird and snake snatching had made her grandiose by any scale of the imagination. She looked as big as a building.

For a brief moment, I visualized that building hurtling itself toward me and grinding me, mauling me into pulp mash. Her eyes took me in. I saw her ears flicking, fanning flies. The piglets under her belly squealed; they wanted to move on. But before she did, that giant sow gave my head a brief sniff. Then, deciding that I was what she thought I was, she turned and trotted off into the jungled curtains of Cayo Costa.

That night I got up from my favorite Pine Island easy chair, and picked up Theroux's *Fresh Air Fiend*. Finding the essay "Trespassing in Florida," I read his description of these islands, how "the mud flats, the mangroves and the mosquitoes, have in their way kept much of the area liberated, obscure, and somewhat empty."

He could have been describing me that night. I'd never brag about standing my ground with a wild pig that could've rendered me into shreds of red, raw meat. I won't brag on my courage, or for that matter, my timidity; but I will always remember the peculiar, peaceful and blissfully empty feeling that came afterward. For a moment, I was one with the wild. The ancient itch was still in me, and it had seen me through another moment of truth. †

Pine Island's Gerald Hausman has written more than 35 books for children and adults.