

Burmese pythons prove elusive prey in Florida challenge

February 27 2013, by David Zucchini

Strapped to Billy Bullard's hip was a machete he'd bought at a yard sale. In his fist were 4-foot-long metal snake tongs. Attached to the tongs was a high-resolution waterproof camera he called a "snake-cam."

All he had to do now was find a Burmese python.

Bullard had been invited, along with just about anyone else willing to pay a \$25 fee, to plunge into swampland and kill the fat, generally docile snakes that have been threatening the Everglades' ecosystem. The Python Challenge, sponsored by the [Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission](#), offered cash prizes: \$1,000 for the longest Burmese python and \$1,500 for the most [pythons](#) captured and killed.

Alas, estimates of the [Burmese python](#) population of South Florida range from tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands. The point of the first-time contest was not to kill every last python but to raise public awareness of the need to eliminate them. They are an invasive, fast-breeding species that crushes and eats all manner of [native birds](#) and other animals, including alligators, bobcats, deer, raccoons and possums.

Most of the tan-and-brown-mottled Burmese pythons have been released into the wild since the 1980s by owners weary of caring for pets that can grow up to 26 feet long and as thick as a small tree. Other pythons escaped when Hurricane Andrew destroyed pet-breeding facilities in 1992. The snakes kill by constriction and are usually not a threat to humans.

Bullard, 40, knows Burmese pythons. He's caught more than 30 of them in the two years he's run an animal removal service - the biggest one 13 feet. He doesn't kill the ones he removes; he bags them and donates them to reptile centers. His business motto, "Saving wildlife and people," is printed on his pickup along with an alligator logo and a "Got Ammo?" bumper sticker.

During the contest's second weekend last month, Bullard bagged two pythons in the Francis S. Taylor Wildlife Management Area. They were small - about 3 feet long.

"I didn't find them. They found me," he said. They had slithered toward him on a dirt path.

Bullard held them down with his tongs and, with two quick thwacks of his machete, hacked off their heads.

(The contest website recommends a gun or a captive bolt, the sinister cow-killing weapon brandished by the psycho killer in "No Country for Old Men." Decapitation is OK too, according to the rules, as long as it "results in immediate loss of consciousness and destruction of the brain.")

Bullard recorded the GPS position of his python kills and photographed them, as required. He delivered the heads and bodies to an approved drop-off station. He declined the contest's offer to return the python hides to him. Too small to bother with, he said.

On the challenge's final weekend, he set off to find something more substantial. It was late afternoon on a warm, steamy day when Bullard drove back to the Taylor reserve.

There, Bullard ran into competition - four men who had been combing

the reserve for two days, hunting knives at the ready, sleeping in their cars and surviving on sandwiches and cereal. They offered a dismal status report: They hadn't seen a single python.

"We've seen gators and birds and all kinds of snakes, but no pythons," said Paul Hobbs, 27.

Even so, they intended to keep hunting for another day or two, until Hobbs' dad, Tom Hobbs, 61, had to drive back home to Tennessee.

Why were they so determined to catch a python? "We've been catching snakes all our lives, but never a python," said Paul's brother-in-law, Austin Park, 22.

Bullard listened impassively, but brightened when Park mentioned that they'd walked past a huge, white alligator skull. Bullard loves animals - alive or dead - and collects all kinds of critter stuff.

Awhile back, he retrieved a 4-foot savannah monitor lizard as a pet for his 8-year-old son, Tyler, who named the creature Max. But Max got loose and fell in the pool and drowned while Bullard was away on his first Python Challenge hunt. He and Tyler buried Max in the backyard.

"My son cried for a week," he said.

After hearing about the apparent dearth of Burmese pythons in the Taylor reserve, Bullard decided to drive to nearby Big Cypress National Preserve. The area was off-limits to most competitors in the challenge, but Bullard could hunt there because he has a year-round Florida python harvesting license.

There were no python hunters - or anyone else - in sight when Bullard started hiking down a dirt track in Big Cypress. It was ideal python-

hunting time, late in the afternoon, when the constrictors roll onto the sun-baked roadways to warm themselves.

Bullard walked for mile after mile, searching through roadside brush, looking for the flattened spots in the dirt or grass left by a python on the move. He waded into marshes, poking behind cypress trees.

Nothing.

In the evening gloom, Bullard switched on a battery-powered searchlight he'd just bought at Wal-Mart. The beam cut through the heavy brush and high grasses as he plunged through the muck, hauling his machete, tongs and snake-cam.

He got on his knees in the moist dirt to inspect every culvert he passed. Pythons sometimes crawl into the pipes. He shone his light into one culvert and yelped in surprise. Three sets of eyes glared back at him. Then he laughed. It was three frogs.

Inside another culvert, the searchlight revealed a mass of brown - a 6-foot alligator that had crammed itself inside. "Hah, now you're going to have to haul your fat butt out of there backwards," Bullard yelled at the gator.

He hiked on. He bent down to look inside the next culvert, then jumped back up to the road bank. He leaped impressively high for a man who stands 6 foot 1 and weighs 250 pounds. "Water moccasins!" he hollered.

Coiled outside the culvert were two plump, poisonous vipers several feet long. Bullard leaned over and extended his tongs. He plucked one water moccasin out of the dirt and raised it high. His snake-cam was whirring - he enjoys making wild animal videos - capturing a close-up of the snake as its fangs snapped at the moist air.

Bullard lowered the snake to the road, and it sprayed him with foul-smelling musk. He released the tongs, and the moccasin slithered back into the culvert.

Night was falling - and still no sign of pythons. The muscular snakes camouflage themselves well and hide in tall grass, burrows, water and even trees, says Frank Mazzotti, a University of Florida professor who helped organize the challenge.

Bullard had hiked about four miles. He turned around for the march back to his truck; he continued to poke through the roadside brush for pythons.

His odds of finding his quarry were rapidly diminishing, but Bullard didn't mind. He was happy just being in the wild, watching white herons flushed from the swamp by a big black vulture, and inspecting big spiders wandering in the high grass.

He spun around and shone his light when he heard the heavy grunting of a feral hog somewhere in the forest. He wished he hadn't left his .22-caliber pellet gun in his truck. He likes to hunt the hogs and roast their meat.

Feral hogs are the only pests he doesn't charge to remove in his business; he gives them to friends to roast. He's never been stiffed for payment after removing other animals. "I just tell them: Pay me - or I'll bring it back."

The mosquitoes were biting now, and Bullard remembered he'd left his bug repellent in the truck. His searchlight battery was dying, the hog was getting closer and he was dirty and sweaty. There were four urgent animal removal requests - jobs that pay - on his cellphone. It was time for Bullard to end the python hunt, though he was empty-handed.

He wasn't the only one. During the monthlong challenge that ended Feb. 10, nearly 1,600 contestants captured just 68 Burmese pythons - the longest one 14 feet.

By now, Bullard had come to regret finishing off the two little pythons, no matter how invasive or voracious. "Just didn't feel right," he said.

His livelihood involved capturing animals, not killing them. He decided that this would be his first and final Python Challenge.

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