

Pythons extend their grip on parts of South Florida

September 23 2016, by David Fleshler, Sun Sentinel

Burmese pythons appear to be slithering into new territory, extending their range and putting more of South Florida's wildlife at risk of becoming lunch.

Python hatchlings were discovered for the first time on Key Largo, an ominous development for the island's wildlife, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission announced Thursday. And last week, a 10-foot python was found on a levee at the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge in western Palm Beach County, indicating that the huge constrictor may have staked out territory in the northernmost section of the Everglades.

The big snakes, which can swim, have been found for years on Key Largo. But the discovery of three hatchlings in August is the first evidence that they have established a breeding population there.

"We worry about pythons becoming established in the Keys because there are several at-risk populations of small mammals, like the Key Largo woodrat and the Key Largo cotton mouse, that would be easy prey for Burmese pythons," said Bryan Falk, a biologist with the U.S. Geological Survey.

The python at the Loxahatchee refuge was discovered by a law enforcement officer driving on a levee at night, just west of West Delray Regional Park. Upon seeing the python, he hit the brakes but ran over it. The snake was still alive, so he killed it with a machete, said Steve

Henry, deputy project leader at the refuge.

The snake's remains were sent to the University of Florida for analysis. Although three pythons had been found previously on the refuge, they all turned out to be released pets. If analysis of its DNA and stomach contents reveal it to be a wild python, it would be the first such snake found on the refuge, Henry said.

The main concern would be the refuge's small mammals, such as raccoons, opossums and woodrats, he said.

"If you look at what happened with the python at Everglades National Park, it started with the [small mammals](#)," he said. "Their populations just imploded."

Native to southern Asia, Burmese pythons established a breeding population in Everglades National Park in the 1990s, as a by-product of the exotic pet business. There are thought to be some combination of released pets and escapees from a breeding facility damaged in Hurricane Andrew.

No one knows the extent of their South Florida range, said Kristen Sommers, exotic species coordinator for the state wildlife commission. Beyond Everglades National Park, they are likely to be established in other parts of the Everglades, as well as state parks and hunting lands to the west and north of the Everglades, she said.

It's also unknown how far they could spread, although the relatively cold winters of Central Florida could serve as a rough limit, she said. Even the mild winters of South Florida have in the past held down the populations of non-native species such as iguanas.

But she said the warm weather of the past few years, with the lack of

severe winter cold snaps, has likely allowed pythons and other non-native species to spread.

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