

Pandemic hasn't slowed Florida's python captures, even with fewer hunters on the prowl

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With fewer python hunters working in South Florida during the coronavirus lockdown, one likely consequence could be fewer snakes captured over the past couple of months.

That's not been the case.

The giant invasive constrictors are everywhere, devouring mammals in the Everglades and showing up in new places where they have been easy pickings for veteran wranglers like Donna Kalil, the first woman to be hired by state-sponsored programs to eliminate the snakes.

"We may be in lockdown but the pythons are still out there, eating our wildlife, reproducing and expanding their range very quickly," Kalil, who wears a trademark pink shirt on all hunts, said from a location in Everglades National Park where she was hunting on Tuesday. State-hired python hunters, a job that only exists in Florida, are designated essential workers and have been allowed to move in and out of state lands to look for snakes even during statewide stay-at-home orders.

Still, Kalil said she hasn't gone hunting as much over the past month to respect public health rules to slow the spread of COVID-19, but also because it's been difficult to find volunteers to go along on her hours-long road cruising trips. But the times she did go on hunts recently have been productive.

Last week she got lucky and found an egg-bearing female measuring 14 feet, which will fetch a bonus from the state-sponsored programs that pay hunters \$50 for each python measuring up to four feet plus \$25 more for each additional foot, and an additional \$200 for a nesting female. Kalil said she hasn't noticed changes in behavior because of the lockdown, but said she found snakes in places where they are usually hard to spot.

The number of snakes caught in March this year dropped to 10 compared with 16 last year, according to the South Florida Water Management District. But in April, the numbers from the district are actually up: 55 compared with 46 in the same month last year. The

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, which also manages a python removal program, didn't reply to requests for recent python data.

Pythons are breeding during this time of year, which means that snakes tend to be hiding in inaccessible places, and captures traditionally drop. But scoring a female with eggs is a double victory: more cash for the hunter and at least a dozen fewer voracious snakes eating marsh rabbits and wading bird eggs in the fragile ecosystem.

Finding "honey holes" is something Tom Rahill has been doing in the Everglades during the coronavirus crisis. Rahill, a longtime python hunter and founder of Swamp Apes, an organization that takes war veterans to the Everglades to catch pythons to ease combat trauma, is one of the few hardcore hunters still cruising around dirt roads or exploring the marshes by canoe.

"The best thing about being in the Everglades now, when things are more quiet, is we can spot new hunting grounds more easily," Rahill said. He's been going out alone, respecting social-distancing rules, to map out places where he plans to take veterans once quarantine restrictions are lifted. He won't say where the new spots are. "There is a lot of competition."

Burmese pythons pose a serious threat to the Everglades ecosystem, as they can easily move around the marshes and tree islands, where they find plenty of food all year round. For nearly two decades, these voracious snakes have been successful at reproducing in the wetlands because they have no predators. Females can lay up to 100 eggs a year.

Wildlife managers believe they first arrived in South Florida as pets, and were released in the Everglades three decades ago, where they found the perfect home. By some estimates there are currently as many as 300,000

roaming the Everglades.

Since 2017, the South Florida Water Management District and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission have been paying registered hunters to help control the population.

Not much has changed in python hunting practices during the pandemic, and social distancing was already the norm for most agents who work alone or with one partner at the most. With fewer hunters road-cruising, pythons have probably gone on roads more often to bask after cooler nights, said Michael Kirkland, an invasive animal biologist at the Water Management District.

"We probably had fewer people going out especially at the beginning of quarantine last month, but now we see activity picking up again," he said. And there are other factors to consider, too, like an earlier breeding season and drier conditions, which help hunters spot the pythons.

One thing that changed for hunters is that the COVID-19 pandemic has shut down weighing stations at state and federal lands. That's where hunters take their catch to be measured and fitted with a unique ID so the same [snake](#) isn't counted twice. It's a crucial step to calculate compensation for the [hunter](#). Now, [python](#) measuring and recording is being done during live video chats with the district and FWC officials.

Kalil's 14-footer female is currently in her freezer, waiting for the video call to be scheduled, she said.

"While it's harder to find them when they are breeding, it's a good time to make an extra effort and find these females, which are worth so much more when the goal is to remove as many snakes as possible."

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