

Florida's celebrated climate, so attractive to humans, is also hospitable to many exotic species of plants and animals. While some of these non-native species are limited in their extent, some—termed “invasive”—have exploded across the Florida landscape, advantaged by a combination of their own life history characteristics and Florida's environment. History is littered with examples of extinctions caused by the introduction of novel predators, and exotic invaders may pose this same threat to some of Florida's signature, native wildlife. Perhaps most notorious among these invaders are large constrictors like the Burmese python, already well established in the Florida Everglades and spreading.

Large Constrictors: The Threat

Unfortunately for Florida, the snake is already out of the bag. Four species of large constrictors are already known to be breeding in the wild in South Florida, and individual sightings continue to occur further north in the Florida peninsula. Protected species like endangered Key Largo woodrat, roundtail muskrat, Limpkin, and White Ibis have all been found in the stomach contents of pythons captured from the wild in Florida. Additionally, the US Geological Survey determined more than 120 imperiled species such as the Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow, Florida Burrowing Owl, Wood Stork, Snail Kite, and Key deer could be vulnerable to these highly effective, exotic predators.



The Solution: A Two-Pronged Approach

To get a handle on Florida's quickly multiplying problem, Audubon advocates for a two-pronged approach: **meaningful source control**, to stem

the flow of new introductions of these animals into the wild, and aggressive, well-funded **eradication efforts**, to limit the expansion of these invaders into new areas, and remove them from wildlands where they are already established.

Source Control

Not only is Florida's habitat hospitable to large constrictors, but South Florida is a major center for the country's reptile industry, both import and domestic production. As a result, Audubon is actively working to support federal and state efforts to end the trade in these invasive exotics, and support amnesty programs to provide current permitted snake owners with an alternative to releasing unwanted constrictors to the wild.

On the federal level, Audubon is supporting the US Fish and Wildlife Service's efforts to declare the Burmese python and eight other giant constrictors “injurious” under the Lacey Act. This move would forever prohibit the importation and interstate commerce in these damaging species. The USFWS evaluation is currently in progress, and a final determination will hopefully be rendered in 2011.

Florida is ground zero for this invasion. On the state level, Audubon has been a champion during the 2010 Florida Legislative Session for legislation prohibiting the ownership and trade of Burmese pythons, Nile monitors and five other species of invasive exotic reptiles in Florida. We similarly support the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's pet amnesty days, where current owners of exotic animals can surrender their unwanted pets, no questions asked, as an alternative to releasing them into Florida's wildlands.



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Eradication and Management

Large constrictors are uniquely suited to Florida's environment. Habitat generalists, they are able to survive and thrive in many of Florida's habitats, and can be difficult to eradicate due to cryptic coloring, their use of harder-to-access aquatic habitats, and their ability to evade capture.

Audubon is working to prioritize the research most needed to meet this challenge, calling attention to important questions like: What habitat types are functioning as python dispersal corridors? What search and eradication techniques are proving most effective? Where are the important boundaries of python extent—in other words, where are the wildlands where we must place a priority on “holding the line” against the spread of pythons? What species of concern are particularly vulnerable to pythons, and how should that effect where we focus our eradication efforts? What is the full extent of the impacts pythons are already having on South Florida's ecosystem?

Southwest Florida is home to Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, a RAMSAR-designated Wetland of International Significance and site



of one of Florida's most important colonies of federally endangered Wood Storks. Fortunately, pythons have not been found at Corkscrew... yet.

With the generous support of private donors, we are also leading the charge against pythons and other invasive exotic animals in Southwest Florida with the creation of Audubon's Invasive Species Task Force, a team of Audubon's science, land management and policy staff focused on this challenge on the ground in Southwest Florida and at the state and federal policy level.

Corkscrew is the epicenter for our work organizing Southwest Florida's land management community around this issue, to coordinate and disseminate resources and knowledge, and to join forces in the face of this daunting challenge.

How You Can Help

Be a responsible pet owner: Releasing exotic pets into the wild is dangerous for them--many don't survive--and dangerous for Florida's native wildlife if they do! Contact your local animal control or the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission for no-questions-asked options to surrender your unwanted pet so a home can be found for it.

Report sightings of large constrictors immediately: Log on to www.EDDMapS.org/Florida or call 1-888-IVE-GOT-1. Be sure to record the date, time and exact location to the best of your ability, and if you have a camera, snap a quick picture! Citizen scientists have an important role to play in documenting the extent of these species in Florida.

Support Meaningful Source Control and Sufficient Funding for Eradication Efforts: Join Audubon's online conservation community, the Florida Conservation Network. You'll receive weekly email newsletters during legislative session, and periodically during the rest of the year, updating you on progress and opportunities to call on your legislators to support this important work. Sign up online at <http://fl.audubonaction.org>

Donate: Your financial support helps ensure Audubon staff can provide invaluable coordination for eradication and research efforts on the ground, and science-based policy efforts in the halls of the capitols in Tallahassee and D.C. Call (305) 371-6399 or donate online at www.audubonofflorida.org.