



Volunteer veterans
help capture Florida's
invasive Burmese pythons
and treat their own PTSD.

THE SWAMP APES

By Robert Kiener

Tom Rahill, the founder of Swamp Apes,
handles a Burmese python at the Everglades
Holiday Park in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

The sun has just set in the Florida Everglades, and a great blue heron flies lazily over this famous “river of grass,” while a battered pickup truck creeps slowly along a hard-packed gravel road that flanks a canal some 30 miles west of Homestead, Fla. The heavy, moist air is thick with millions of buzzing, swarming mosquitoes and other biting insects. In the back of the old Ford F-150, Lt. Col. Arnold T. Stocker, USAFR, and a handful of military veterans are swatting away bugs as they scan the Everglades for “the enemy” that they have volunteered to hunt down and help eradicate — the invasive Burmese python.

Stocker and the veterans have teamed up to help Tom Rahill, the founder of the nonprofit wilderness conservation program “The Swamp Apes,” to search out, capture, and destroy the invasive snakes that have laid waste to the native wildlife in much of the Everglades. Indeed, after first being spotted in the region in the late 1990s, the massive snakes, which can grow to 18 feet long and weigh more than 100 pounds, have multiplied wildly and so far have killed off 97% of the region’s white-tailed deer, 87% of its bobcats, and virtually all of its rabbits and foxes. Some of these skilled ambush hunters have even been known to try to kill and eat alligators.

No one is certain how the snakes first arrived in the Everglades. Some believe they were abandoned in the region by pet owners. Others point to escapees from a snake research and Burmese python breeding facility that was destroyed by Hurricane Andrew in 1992 as one of the culprits. Whatever their origin, most naturalists and scien-

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tists agree that the invaders are “eating their way through the Everglades” and are fast becoming the region’s apex predator. Said Rob Moher, president and CEO of the Conservancy of Southwest Florida, “We have to stop their population growth and protect native animals before it’s too late.” There may be as many as 300,000 pythons in the Everglades now.

As Rahill steers the Swamp Apes’ pickup along the narrow levee road and shines a battery of lights on the nearby waters, Stocker suddenly shouts, “Snake!” Before Rahill can come to a complete stop, Stocker has leapt over the side of the truck, slid down the side of the levee, and grabbed the tail of an eight-foot-long Burmese python. The heavily muscled snake splashes into the murky water and tries to swim away into the Everglades, almost pulling Stocker along with it.

However, it is no match for the fit 64-year-old, a lifelong herpetologist and Special Forces, Para-Rescue trained reservist.

The other veterans surround Stocker as he expertly holds the snake, putting one hand under its belly, lifting it, then another hand under its belly again while pulling it back toward him, always staying clear of its razor-sharp teeth. While the python lashes out at Stocker, he handles it gently but firmly, and it eventually tires.

Someone pulls out a phone and takes a video of the snake as it relaxes and slithers over Stocker’s arms and shoulders. The excited group exchanges high-fives while watching Rahill and Stocker manhandle the snake into a cloth bag, and soon they scramble back to the pickup.

“One down, and a couple hundred thousand to go!” shouts Rahill as he climbs back behind the wheel. He starts up his truck, switches on its powerful, roof-mounted spotlights, and adds, “Let’s go, Swamp Apes!”



Burmese pythons are an invasive species in Florida’s Everglades. They can grow to 18 feet long and weigh more than 100 pounds.



The Swamp Apes recently held a veterans event with “Walking With Warriors,” clockwise from top; Swamp Apes founder Tom Rahill and veteran Rahm Levinson with python “Queen Kong” after a rare instance of finding a python on her nest with eggs; Rahill and Sgt. Maj. Tom Aycock, USAR (Ret), hold one of the hundreds of pythons they have captured together; on a chameleon hunt, Lt. Col. Arnold T. Stocker, USAFR, a member of the South Florida Tactical Athletes (a training program founded by Stocker), and Rahill hold some by-catch green iguanas, which are also an invasive species in Florida.



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A SLITHERING DISTRACTION KICKS OFF A NEW MISSION

Although Tom Rahill, a Florida-based 64-year-old telecommunications specialist, was never in the military, he founded the Swamp Apes in 2008 as a way to “pay back” the veterans who served our country. After signing up as a volunteer in the Everglades

National Park in 2008, he was invited to join a python eradication program.

“My wife had moved to Arkansas to take a job, and I was despondent about her leaving,” he recalled. “But spending my off days hunting down pythons, in miserable, hot, bug-infested conditions, was like therapy for me. It got my mind off my troubles. Then I had my ‘aha moment’ when I wondered if veterans could benefit from the same experience. Could it even help some of them with PTSD?”

His brother-in-law and sister-in-law both served in the Army and inspired him to invite veterans along on snake-hunting trips.

“Veterans had the perfect training for this kind of a mission,” said Rahill. “Their skills, from situational awareness to respect for chain of command, to self-reliance to a sense of mission target, were ideal.”

Rahill put the word out, and veterans volunteered to join him on his trips into the Everglades.

“Everything clicked,” he said. Using mostly his own money, he formed the nonprofit Swamp Apes in 2008. He soon discovered his hunch was right.

“For example, the sense of camaraderie these vets got by joining forces in the Everglades — on a mission again — helped fill a void in many of their lives after they returned from serving in Iraq or Afghanistan,” he explained. The group’s motto is “Endure. Evolve. Achieve.”

A typical Swamp Apes excursion involves hunting for pythons by walking along or riding over miles and miles of gated-off levees, 24 hours a day, looking for signs of the heavily camouflaged, deadly invader. Volunteers have to endure soar-

ing temperatures, brutal bouts with mosquitoes, possible contacts with venomous snakes, and more — all for the adrenaline rush of spotting and capturing the elusive python.

As with a military mission, Rahill ensures participants are prepared — as much as possible — for the conditions and potential dangers involved. Everyone receives a gear list ahead of time and undergoes an orientation before searching for snakes.

When veterans told him how much going out on Swamp Apes missions, whether they captured snakes or not, helped them with issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder, Rahill was inspired.

“I wondered if we could expand this ‘wilderness therapy’ idea and enlist trained therapists in the program,” he said. A study of some veterans who had participated in the program, which was conducted by Dr. Manisha Joshi at the University of South Florida’s School of Social Work, found that it had helped reduce trauma symptoms, helped improve family relationships, and given the vets a new sense of purpose.

A mother of a Swamp Apes participant who described her son as severely depressed after leaving the military noted a big change in her son after he got involved with the Swamp Apes.

“He’s more friendly, active, and responsible. He’s found a lot of relief,” she said. “The stress was taken away by getting involved with Swamp Apes.”

Stocker explained that he has seen the benefits for veterans who have volunteered with the Swamp Apes time after time.

“I’ve seen many veterans who had turned far inward after coming home with PTSD, and after volunteering with us, they have opened up and communicated with other people,” he said. “Also, spending time in the Everglades makes them feel more connected to nature and that helps them regain a deeper sense of purpose. Using the skills they learned in the military makes them feel valued again.”

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HELPING VETERANS ALWAYS TOP OF MIND
Ask Rahill how many pythons he and the Swamp Apes have caught, and he’ll probably screw up his nose, scratch his head, and answer, “A thousand? Maybe?” It’s clear that he is less interested in quantity than quality, and the quality that excites him is the quality of the experience his Swamp Apes nonprofit can offer military veterans.

“Tom Rahill has devoted countless hours to helping our veterans,” said Sgt. Maj. Tom Aycock, an Iraq veteran who recently retired from the Army Active Guard Reserve and has been a longtime and frequent volunteer with the Swamp Apes. “And he’s always interested in seeing how he can help more. If he could get the funding, he would want to add a therapy offering to his program, something he’s been talking about for ages.”

Rahill is also interested in establishing a complex where vets could receive counseling. In the meantime, he keeps taking veterans out to hunt for pythons and help with other conservation tasks in the Everglades.

“Believe it or not,” he joked, “but not everyone is anxious to jump on the back of an 80-pound python that could kill him in minutes. So we do a lot more, such as trail clearing, than just hunting for snakes.”

To sum up Rahill’s connection to veterans, you need look no further than one of the patches he wears on a sleeve of his Swamp Apes military-like uniform. It’s simply the number “22.”

Rahill, who’s usually smiling or joking as he explains his work, paused and caught his breath. Then he explained, “Twenty-two. That’s the average number of veterans who the VA says commit suicide every day. That’s the number we’re trying to bring down. Those are the people the Swamp Apes are trying to help.” ■■■

Robert Kiener is a writer based in Vermont.



From top, members of the Swamp Apes and the South Florida Tactical Athletes hold python “Farah,” which won the longest and heaviest categories in the 2020 Python Bowl, a hunting competition; Neisa Sterner, a Swamp Apes intern, and veteran Rahm Levinson hold python “Deanna”; Lt. Col. Arnold T. Stocker holds a 17.5 foot python captured in the Everglades.

