TEN DAYS IN THE GLADES

IN THE UNFORGIVING EVERGLADES, ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN

MICHAEL GOLDY
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This book is based on a ten day journey, eleven if you count the first night in, along the Wilderness Waterway of Everglades National Park. I have traveled a great deal through the United States, Canada and Mexico and spent time in pretty much every type of ecosystem and wilderness situation that exists with the exception of the Arctic. Whether it is desert, mountain or forest, nothing in my experience comes close to the harshness and potential dangers of the wilderness areas of Everglades National Park and Big Cypress Swamp.

The book is almost entirely as this particular trip occurred, the exceptions being the alligator incident at Roberts River, (which actually occurred on a previous three day trip) and “Trevor” is a fictional character very loosely based on a couple of participants on other trips. The Roberts incident was one of my more interesting experiences and I wanted to include it in this book. Quite a few of the “Trevor incidents” did occur exactly as depicted on other trips and I felt it was important to show that side of things as well as a different perspective and the ultimate lessons learned from such an experience on a novice. I have taken novices out on trips and the experience always has seems to bring about a change in attitude and perspective. The “campfire stories” are all factual events that occurred as presented.
I actually soloed on this particular trip and had a homemade sail rig that I designed and built specifically for this trip. As it turned out I was only able to use on the jog from Highland Creek to Graveyard Creek offshore in the Gulf (Chapter 8). It was designed to be quickly dismantled and stowed for paddling through creeks and hopefully sailing the open bays. If one looks closely at the first chapter photo the rudder mechanism is prominent. Sailing a canoe in the open Gulf with a cross wind and cross swells is a tricky maneuver, and when the sharks showed up I figured it was time to put down the sail and paddle. The winds were in our faces and seas too rough to sail a canoe most of the trip.

The other participants in the trip and support group are real people, although I did change the names other than my own. They are all fine people with good hearts and anything in the dialogue that might stray from their true thoughts I apologize for, but I did try my best to keep it true to their fine personalities, abilities and contributions to this and other successful adventures. “Karen” (not real name) had a good soul and she is unfortunately not with us anymore. I dedicate this book to her, my former brother in law Mike and other true lovers of the natural world, particularly those who ventured into this beautiful, but unforgiving wilderness only to meet their end.
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Nine Mile Pond, more of a small lake, is not far from the end of the sole road going through Everglades National Park to the marina and ranger station at Flamingo. Greg and Mike loaded the canoe in the hot June sun at the pull off from the road. The air had a slight brackish smell, the light breeze coming off the lake and prairies beyond. The wet season had not quite kicked in yet and water levels were low. The small lake was loaded with about twenty gators and at least one crocodile apparently drawn to the only deep water around. There were a couple of picnic tables at the launching spot and they were packed with vultures that sat and quietly watched the two load up.

“It’s weird”, Greg replied. “I wonder what’s up with them.”

“I don’t know, but if we were in a primitive culture, we would
probably call it a bad omen and call this off.”

“Lot of cruisers out there”, Greg said, looking out over the wa-

ter.

“At least one is a croc. I saw him when we started loading, but I don’t see him now.”

“We need to have the cameras ready.”

“Absolutely. Ready to go?”

“I’m ready. Let’s power across this mess as quickly as pos-
sible.”

Greg climbed in front of the canoe and Mike pushed off into the lake. This was not a place to linger and they powered across the water toward the sawgrass prairies and mangrove swamps that lie beyond.

This is an interesting area as it is the transition zone where the freshwater sawgrass wetland and brackish mangrove swamp meet. Both ecosystems are somewhat intermingled and there are some interesting sights and unusual photographs to be had. De-
spite the heavy concentration of the large reptiles, the crossing was uneventful, other that a couple of jogs around some of the larger ones that refused to budge to the approaching canoe. The lake crossing complete, they passed into the wet prairie beyond through a pass in the mangroves surrounding the lake, What lie ahead was a combination of wet prairies, small isolated red man-
groves and some mangrove stands.

While there was a poorly marked “canoe trail” back through the area, the endless wet prairies and swamp allowed for random routes pretty much anywhere. They had no intention of sticking to any suggested trail. The idea was to make a circular route, cut-
ting southeast into the more brackish area gradually turning to the north and finally back west through the fresher areas. That was just a general plan. Water conditions and the locations and thickness of the stands of trees would probably necessitate modi-
fications to the route. They would keep track of compass bearings and times spent in order to determine the final bearings back out. There are no definitive maps or charts of areas such as this and on occasion they made their own.
“This is pretty shallow”, Greg noted shortly after entering the prairie.
“That would certainly explain why the lake is so loaded”.
Mike said. “Shit, this is different.”
“What?”
“Look up.”
Several of the vultures had taken to the air and followed them across the lake. They were lazily circling in the sky directly above.
“Great”, Greg said.
The canoe scraped bottom and slowed considerably. A couple of strokes later they were stuck.
“Maybe we should have waited for later in the wet season to do this one”, Mike said.
“It can’t be this bad the whole way back”, Greg said. “Time to get out and pull a bit.”
They jumped out and both immediately sank almost to the knees in the aromatic wet mud. Nothing to do but grab the bow-line and start pulling. Greg took the first turn and Mike walked alongside as they headed back. It was getting hot and the going was tough.
“Let’s head a little further south, more into the mangroves”, Mike said. “Better chance of hitting deeper water that way.”
They took a turn to the right in search of navigable depth. There were short spots of brief water, but not deep enough to float the loaded canoe. They took turns pulling the canoe, sinking over a foot into the mud on every step. After about a mile, a very long, hot, muddy mile, a small area of open water loomed ahead.
“That look like a good place for a break”, Greg said.
“Sounds good to me, but let’s get a picture first.”
Mike set up his tripod, jamming the legs into the mud in front of the canoe. He set the exposure and focused on Greg standing next to the canoe. Setting the timer he pushed the release button and trudged back to the canoe, on the side opposite Greg. He barely made it and got turned around when the click indicated the shot had been taken.
“That’s a different one”, Greg said, grabbing his camera and
heading toward the tripod.

Cameras were exchanged and the shot repeated with Greg’s camera.

After they both shot a couple of landscape shots Mike stowed the tripod and the journey toward the small body of water resumed. Shortly into the pond there was enough water to float the canoe. The muddy pond was only about two hundred feet in diameter and they paddled to the middle, only having eighteen inches of water depth. The surrounding landscape was all muddy prairies with stands of stunted mangroves. No other open water was in sight in any direction. Greg dropped the anchor as they studied the situation. He hopped to the other side of the seat was facing Mike in the rear.

“Lunch?” Mike asked, opening the cooler in front of him.

“That wasn’t easy, I’m starved.”

“Here”, Mike said, passing him two sandwiches and a cold beer. “I don’t know about you, but I’m starting to get the shits of this. I don’t fell like walking through mud all day.”

“It’s just starting to get hot. This will just get worse and the further we go the further we have to walk back out. What do you suggest?”

“It’s too dry out here. We need to get to tidewater. How about Hell’s Bay? We could run out to Lard Can or Pearl Bay.”

“Sound’s good”, Greg answered. “Hey! Look out.”

Mike turned and saw it coming. It was about a ten footer and was making a beeline for him at full speed in the muddy shallows.

“Hit him with the paddle”, Greg hollered.

The spare paddle was a heavy wooden one and it was within easy reach. There was barely enough time to grab it and make the swing the direction of the charging gator. It was almost up to the boat, swiftly moving in, mouth open and ready, but the paddle hit the water in front of it with a loud whack. This startled the gator and he backed off about ten feet, and then made another fast charge, mouth wide open again. This time Mike had a little more time to get a better strike and came down hard right between the eyes. Greg was working at getting the anchor up. He just about
had it when the gator made a third charge and was beaten off again. Once Greg got the anchor up he turned the canoe sideways. The gator backed off back toward the edge of the small body of water. It was no longer looking at the small profile of the rear of the canoe with a tasty meal sitting right above the water line. Now it was this seventeen feet long thing and had two creatures in it, at least one of which was taking no crap. It remained motionless and eyed the canoe with an intense stare. This activity had caught the attention of the vultures and they were considerably lower, circling directly above.

“Son of a bitch”, Mike said.

“We should probably get out of here”, Greg said.

“It parked itself right where we need to go back through. That son of a bitch must have followed us back here from the lake.”

“Water’s low and they’re stressed for food. Stuck in mud is no place to get in a gator fight.”

“We don’t have a choice. Let’s barrel over him and paddle as far as we can.”

The gator was almost directly in front of the trail of deep footprints and the dragged canoe leading out of the shallow water and through the mud. They picked up speed and headed directly for it. Fortunately the gator was about thirty feet out from the edge of the navigable water and did back off a bit as the canoe barreled down at it. It certainly had not been a given that was going to happen. For good measure Greg slapped the water with his paddle as they neared it to give a message. Hitting the mud Greg and Mike jumped out.

“You take the canoe first and I’ll deal with him”, Mike said, holding his heavy teak dowel.

Greg grabbed the bowline and Mike was at the back of the canoe. Greg started forward and Mike walked backward at the rear of the canoe, eyes on the beast. After they moved in about twenty feet the gator started to follow.

“Not too fast”, Mike said. “It’s not easy walking backward in this shit.”

“Is it coming?”, Greg asked.
“About fifty feet back, but its following.”
“Shit. If it attacks here we’re screwed.”

The going was slow and made the earlier trek in seem like a walk in the park. They took turns, one pulling the canoe and one on watch at the rear with the six foot rod. The gator followed, but maintained its distance. The patient hunter was waiting for them to stop or get stuck and it would be an easy ambush. It was not going to get that opportunity on this day and finally the lake was in sight. No time was wasted in jumping in once sufficient water was reached and they crossed the small lake quickly. They hit the far side and looked out across the water. There was no telling which of the gators that particular one was, but none were approaching shore. The vultures had followed as well and were circling above.

“That was different”, Mike said.

“Sorry assholes, not today”, Greg said, looking up at the nasty birds.

“Let’s load the truck up and hit Hell’s Bay, I’m ready to do some canoeing.”
Three Years Later

Highway 29; two lanes, rural, in some need of repair, and almost straight as an arrow. It did not seem quite meant for ninety hours an hour and they were reminded of that at every bump and pothole. Hopefully the sheriff and his deputies had something better to do than make their quotas, at least on this road, this day. It was almost four thirty in the afternoon and time was running short. Mike was fairly comfortable laid across the back seat of John’s pickup taking in the sights. They hit a bump and a little fountain sprung up from his drink, requiring his attention to recapture it as gravity took over when the truck returned to the ground.

“We’re cutting it close, but I think we’ll make it”, Mike said to John whose sole mission was to get there as quickly as possible.

John, in his usual good natured chuckle said, “I’ll do the best I can”.

A bead of sweat endowed the brow of his bearded face and his deep set eyes stared intently at the road ahead. He was doing his best, but a couple of small glitches beyond their control had delayed the start and time was tight.

They were twenty miles from Everglades City and the ranger station closed in thirty-eight minutes. As usual, there was virtually no traffic on this isolated stretch of road and they were moving. Closer to Copeland and the sheriff station a little further up the road, they would slow up closer to legal speed and remain that way for the last ten miles or so.

The canoe trip would be along the general route of the Wilderness Waterway in Everglades National Park which goes from
Everglades City, on the southwest coast, to Flamingo which is down on the southern tip of the peninsula. The waterway is periodically marked with either wooden or PVC markers and the marked route is supposedly ninety nine miles via the most direct route. There is literally a maze of bays, creeks, rivers and the open Gulf of Mexico allowing a multitude of courses on and off the marked waterway. The planned zig zag route would only be on the marked waterway where that was absolutely the only way through. Full advantage would be taken of the maze like makeup of the backcountry to both pose navigational challenges and to find ultimate isolation in this vast wilderness.

Mounting such an expedition is not to be taken lightly. You are totally dependent on the supplies taken along, which include all camping gear, personal gear, food and most importantly water. While the possibility exists to supplement food supplies en route, there is absolutely no fresh water anywhere along the waterway. It is needed not just for drinking, but for cooking and dishwashing as well. There is no phone coverage for most of the trip and no contact with any other humans. Lack of proper planning and preparation very well may result in fatal consequences.

In addition to uncountable day trips taken by key members of the group, practical expedition experience in the backcountry was incrementally built up over the previous three years. Three years ago an overnight trip was made to Shark Point out in Florida Bay. The following year a three day trip, in and out, to Robert’s River Chickee was taken. Finally a five day trip down the waterway and looping back through the Gulf of Mexico, camping on two uninhabited Keys, was made last year. Each trip brought its lessons regarding gear, consumption of water and food, and every type of camping facility was experienced. Five days into an eleven day trip was no time for surprises, at least not the type resulting from lack of preparation. Additionally, circumstances regarding extreme weather, wind, rough water conditions and some of the interesting creatures encountered are inevitable on such a trip and this is not the situation to start the learning curve on such matters. This particular wilderness is extremely unforgiving.
“Do we have time to stop at the market?”, Derrick asked.

A resounding “NO”, came simultaneously from John and Mike.

“Copeland Market”, thought Mike wondering if the cute, perpetually pregnant teenage girl would be there. A relic of times slipping past, the weathered wooden market was slowly sinking into the muck. Muck, that slippery, slimy, partially organic soil that underlies the wet prairies and swamps is far from an ideal base material for structures. Rather than solidly supporting structures it acts as an extremely slow quicksand, gradually swallowing them up over long periods of time.

The interior has wooden floors of various elevations connected by planked ramps throughout the store. Different portions and additions had sunk into the muck at different rates and the flooring had to be constantly “adjusted” as the building slowly sank into the soggy base it sat on. The people, however, were friendly and it was a normal stop, but today no time was allowed.

The heat shimmered on the road ahead, a cloud of dust following behind. This was the dry season and the prairies were brown and parched, baking under the hot sun. Even though it was only March, the temperature was in the high eighties. To the east, smoke from a wildfire darkened the sky. The smoke was black, a deep organic fire, not one of the fast burning surface fires that are so prevalent and normal. Fires occur as a natural part of the ecosystem, but this was a bad one as the conditions were unusually dry and the rich organic muck usually under water was exposed and burning. Water levels are lower than the natural flow of the ecosystem that existed for thousands of years prior to civil engineering “improvements” of the past century.

A yellow sign with black lettering warned of a “panther crossing” area looming ahead. This was one of the few areas left where panthers roamed wild, but their numbers were few.

“Ever see a panther out here?”, John asked nobody in particular.

“Just one”, Derrick responded. “It was on the buggy trail at
Burn’s Lake. We were lucky to see it. It was lying across a big branch up in a tree. I just happened to look up at the right time. It was above us. I suppose it is a good thing it wasn’t pissed off or hungry.”

“Mike?”, John asked.

“One for me too. It’s incredible all the time I spend out here that it was only that one time.”

“Where?”

“I was hunting on an old logging road in the Turner River Unit. At first I thought it was a hog, I only saw the back through the top of the grass. I was downwind and moved in to about thirty yards. It stuck its head up and I froze. There is no way it could have picked me out, I was at the edge of the trees and like I said downwind. I did have that orange vest on and I am sure that is what caught its attention. They are definitely not color blind. It took a couple of bounds the other direction, went about fifty yards and then cleared a forty foot pond back into the woods.”

“Nice of it to go the other way”, Derrick said.

“Yea, it was, but I never saw an animal move like that. I would not want one pissed at me.”

“I haven’t seen one”, John said. “There aren’t any in the area where our camp is.

“There aren’t many left. I’ve heard forty, some say it’s closer to a hundred, but I don’t think anyone knows for sure.”

“I heard they brought some Texas panthers in”, Derrick said.

“The guy that lives behind me is a federal wildlife officer”, Mike said. “They put radio tags on the ones from Texas and one stopped moving so they went out to check it out. It had broken a leg so they sedated it and put it on a stretcher to set the leg. He said it was not quite knocked out and took a swipe at the vet and almost disemboweled him. They had come in helicopters and had to fly him to Miami. He almost died.”

“Shit”, Derrick said. “How big was it”

“He said well over two hundred pounds. Its head and feet were hanging off the ends of the stretcher.”

“The Florida ones don’t get that big”, John said.
“The one I saw couldn’t have been a more than a hundred pounds dripping wet”, Mike said. “I read the native males can get up to about a hundred and seventy.”

“A lot of people think it was wrong to bring in the Texas ones”, John said.

“Yea, I heard the whole purity of the species thing”, Mike said. “But I think they did the right thing. Their gene pool is so small they were just inbreeding. That would have eventually killed them all.”

“Two hundred pounds though”, Derrick said. “That’s a big cat.”

“I know there are some that big off of Loop Road”, Mike said. “Greg and I haven’t seen any, but we pound plenty of signs. This one cypress was all ripped up at least eight feet above the ground.”

“Probably won’t see one here today either”, John said, “Too hot.”

“I imagine they are napping in the shade right now”, Mike said. They’ll be out when the sun goes down.”

“Not far now”, John said. ”We just may make it.”

The ranger station is located on the far side of Everglades City. City is somewhat of a misnomer, as it is really just a small fishing and crabbing town that has recently had tourism thrust upon them. The area also has a history as an import center for goods that are not taxed or exactly legal; “Square grouper” so to speak. At any rate, it is the official gateway to the northwest portion of Everglades National Park, and the vast wilderness that lay before the group.

It was five minutes till five as they passed through the center of town. They had to get to the ranger station as quickly as possible and bolt up the stairs to hit the permit desk before they locked the door at five o’clock. As John pulled up, Derrick and Mike hopped out and headed in. The door was still open and the lone ranger did not appear to be in any hurry. The wall clock showed the second hand within thirty seconds of five.
“Permits”, Mike hollered from the door, just wanting to make sure.

She looked up and smiled to their relief.

They needed to reserve the sites for ten days out, and obtain camping permits. Had they missed today, they would have to start tomorrow and have lost a night out. This was no disaster, just a pain in the ass and a very long first day to catch up. Mike’s mission was to secure the sites they needed for the ten day trip. Mike and Greg had planned the trip for over a year. They had a well planned route and knew what they needed as far as camp-sites, and hopefully plan A would work. Campsites cannot be reserved in advance, it has to be that day, in person, so you have to be there with your itinerary and hope that what you planned for over a year works out on the first come first serve basis. It is necessary to be flexible as someone may have gotten a site you wanted before you. The permits for the first couple of days are generally where the problem lies and you need to have contingency plans and alternate routes in mind.

The ranger was a cute girl, mid twentyish, blonde with a nice tan. “Your dates are wrong”, She declared. “You have Lopez listed for today, and all the following dates are a day off.”

“No, its right”, Mike told her. “We’re going to Lopez today.”

“You’ll never make it. It gets dark in two hours.”

“We know that.”

This days itinerary was to take a bearing across Chokoloskee Bay and hit the Lopez River mouth by dark, paddling upriver to the Lopez campsite under the almost full moon. “Almost full moon” was perfect, as it was bright and already above the trees at sunset. The only gamble they had when planning was the weather, but the skies were clear. Perfect. It would not have made a difference; they would go no matter what. It was turning out to be a best case scenario for the start and things were looking good.

She looked at John and Derrick, then turned to Mike and smiled, “I take it this is not your first trip into the backcountry”. He just smiled and winked, and she proceeded with the paperwork.
“You get out much?”, he asked.

“Not as much as I would like to this time of year, too many tourists”.

“You camp out there?”

“Sure, it is beautiful.”

“You have our itinerary. Stop by and have dinner with us” Derrick said smiling. “We eat well, no dried fruits and nuts. Meals like steak, chicken and fresh fish.”

“I just might, if I can get out that way. Sweetwater should be nice, the weather is supposed to be gorgeous and the bugs are not bad yet.”

“There you go”, Derrick said. “We have plenty of food and beer”.

They all knew that there was no way in hell she would come, but they were enjoying the conversation.

“I kinda like mixed drinks, martinis in particular.”

“No problem, our bar bin is well stocked.”

“Bar bin!”, she laughed, handing Mike the permits. “You guys be careful out there. If I happen by, I will stop.” She paused and eyed Mike up. “You’re really serious about going in tonight in the dark?”

“Sure. Good moon, easy trip, as long as we make the river mouth by dark. Even if we don’t, we’ll still get there. We made the trip to Lopez last year. You take care, be good, hope to see you, and if not happy trails.”

“You too.”

The departure point was the boat ramp at the northern end of Chokoloskee Island. Chokoloskee is the last vestige of civilization on the southwest coast of Florida. The island town is built on a shell mound constructed by the Calusa Indians. In the land of coastal tropical mangrove swamp, there is little dry ground at high tide, and would be none in the storm surge of a hurricane. In order to establish permanent settlements, generations of Calusas created pockets of high land from the remains of discarded oyster shells over a period of at least two thousand years. Similar to the
dredging and filling of the modern era, but created from a more primitive technology. The island is less than a square mile and has a high elevation of twenty feet.

From the ranger station, it is a three mile drive down the causeway to the Island. The causeway is straight as an arrow, built upon the debris dredged up from the parallel canal right off the road. The others had not caught up yet, and John drove at a leisurely pace as Derrick and Mike studied the whitecaps out in Chokoloskee Bay to the right. The permits were secured and there was no need to hurry at this point.

“Little rough” Derrick exclaimed.

“Yeah, but we’ll be alright”, John replied. The sea breeze had kicked up the waves on the windward side of the causeway and Island, but the journey would be on the other side, and besides the breeze would die down by the time of departure.

As John pulled into the parking lot at the dock, Mike said, “I’ll take care of it, you guys back it up”.

There was a small fee for the dock usage, but putting in here had two advantages. It eliminated three miles of canoeing boredom along the causeway, and despite the park literature, it seemed that the official policy was to deny water access to canoeists not renting equipment from the Park Service at the ranger station. Technically, those three miles were part of the famed “Wilderness Waterway”, but they were a boring three miles that did not matter to this group.

As Mike came out of the small store, the truck was already backed up to the ramp and John and Derrick were removing the straps securing the canoes to the homemade rack. The two seventeen foot canoes were slid into the water and tied up at the end of the short dock paralleling the ramp. The water was clear, although with a slightly brownish tannic acid tint. There was still a merciful breeze, but the leeward side of the bay only had small swells. A couple of small barracuda lazily wandered amongst the piers as the three silently unloaded the supply bins, propane tanks, coolers and water containers, carrying them to the end of the dock.
The task done, Derrick wondered aloud, “Where the hell are those guys?”.

Greg had decided to take a last minute shower after the initial loading that morning at his house, and had a few stops to make as well.

“Don’t worry”, Mike stated. “We have the permits. They’ll be along, and today’s a piece of cake anyway.”

John smiled and shook his head as he climbed into the truck to move from the ramp to a parking spot.

“How about a beer…”, Derrick started, trailing off as he saw a smiling Mike already pulling three out of the cooler.

Mike walked out on the dock to study the bay. There was nothing to do at this point but wait. The mouth of the Turner River loomed almost straight across, but that was not the destination. The Lopez River mouth was down at the south end of the bay. Other than a few deceiving coves, the treeline on the east side of the bay was unbroken. Finding the river, even in the dark shouldn’t present any problem; the oyster bars were the real concern. The bay was shallow with numerous sandbars packed with dense populations of the sharp shelled creatures. His canoe was already scared from hitting those things close to the point of almost splitting open in a couple of spots. In the light there is some chance of seeing the oysters, in the dark, forget it.

Taking a pre-known compass bearing, he tried to locate the shell mound just around the bend at the mouth of the Turner River. It was impossible, just a line of trees. Having been there, he knew that from atop this mound, the river mouth in the bay is in full view (although downriver and partially around a bend), but the mound itself is hardly noticeable even as it is passed on the river.

“Smart son of a bitches.”, Mike murmured.

“What are you talking about?”, Derrick asked.

“That mound is an outpost, a watchtower so to speak. It commands a view of the mouth of the river and bay, but is invisible.”

“What mound?”

“That’s my point. You can’t see it, but it is there and eyes on
top would see us. Those Calusas were no dummies. They definitely had some experienced military thinking. That goes a long way to explain how they were able to fend off the Spanish.”

“What the hell would the Spanish want here?”

“Not here so much as farther up the coast. Ponce De Leon and his entourage were looking to conquer and plunder. They were looking for gold and slaves and there was the illusion of a fountain of youth. They didn’t know this was all swamp. The Calusas knew what they were up to before they arrived from their dealings with the Indians on the east coast. They were ready when the Spanish arrived, and as the location of that mound demonstrates, quite aware of basic military strategy.”

“So they beat the Spanish?”

“Ponce De Leon tried twice, in the 1500’s. The second time he was killed by the Calusas by a poisoned arrow and the other Spanish troops were driven off. Between that sort of thing and the swamp, the Spanish were driven off and abandoned their dreams of conquest of the backcountry.”

“Think of all the mosquitoes that could have served under them.”

“Yea, they could have had a kingdom of billions, but I don’t think the mosquitoes were smart enough to know they were supposed to be subordinate to the Spanish overlords.”

“Which way are we headed?”

“Thataway, same as last year”, replied Mike pointing toward south-southeast across the bay.

“Remember all those oyster bars?”

“Kinda hard to forget. The channel follows the shoreline about two thirds of the way across. We stick to that we’ll be alright.”

Mike would have liked to have Derrick in his bow. Derrick was a pit bull; muscular and providing constant uncomplaining power in the front of the canoe. While he knew in a general sense where they were going, he left the navigation to those most qualified and trusted in the steering abilities of those in the sterns. He was an excellent bowman, leading the brigade.

Heading back to the parking lot they saw David’s Hummer
pull in, canoe tied on top, with the loaded johnboat in tow. Greg jumped out and gave his customary, “Gentlemen!” greeting.

Mike smiled, looked around shrugging his shoulders asking “Where?”, as he shook the extended hand.

“What’s the word?”, asked Greg.

“Ready to load.”

“Permits?”

“No problem. We got everything we wanted, and double chickees all the way.”

“Excellent. Sorry it took so long, well… you know.”

“Actually your timing works out fine. We just finished unloading.”

At that point David had backed up to the ramp and Trevor and Karen emerged from the vehicle. Neither of them looked quite in place. Trevor was wearing his customary gold chain over a colorful t-shirt advertising a New York gentlemen’s club. The designer jeans and sneakers with the knock-off Rolex completed the outfit.

Karen, on the other hand, provided some much appreciated eye candy. Still dressed in her “civvies”, she took the attention off of Trevor’s inappropriate attire. She just could not help bending over to perform an unneeded adjustment to her sandals, momentarily halting the conversations and unloading.

“Where the hell did you find the tourists?”, Mike asked Greg.

“Hey, he’s your cousin.”

“Yea, and your girlfriend.”

“I’ll baby-sit him, you gotta take care of her.”

“Oooo, yea”, Greg smiled.

“Ah, you son of a bitch”, Mike smiled back.

Karen was alright, she held herself well in the backcountry with the right attitude and experience. She would be an asset to the group, but Trevor was questionable.

“Trevor!”, Mike hollered.

“Let’s grab everything out of the johnboat that doesn’t stay before we get it in the water”, Greg stated.

“What stays?”, Trevor asked.

“Everything that’s strapped down”, David replied, now out of
the Hummer eyeing Trevor with disdain. The johnboat had been loaded ready to hit the water, with some other supplies stacked on for the road trip.

Greg and Karen removed the canoe as the rest unloaded the boat. That done, David backed down the ramp and Derrick freed the boat from the trailer, tying it up out the dock. After David pulled out, John and Mike started to carry the gear out on to the dock while Trevor fiddled with his fishing rod.

“The dock”, Mike indicated to him, his hands full and head nodding that direction.

“Just a minute, I need to get this fucking thing ready”, Trevor replied.

“There’ll be time for that. Not now. We need to get moving.”

Trevor unhappily picked up his small day pack and carried it along with the rod out to the gathering gear along Mike’s canoe.

Greg’s brother, George, pulled into the parking lot with Scott and Rick. They had stopped to get dinner along the way and comprised the support group. They were not part of the actual expedition, but their help was greatly needed to pull it off. Their job was to take the vehicles back to Hollywood, and then meet the group at the other end, in Flamingo, eleven days later. Without their help, the trip would have taken an extra day at each end just to shuttle vehicles.

Trevor was now fiddling with his rod out at the end of the dock, and John called out, “Trevor” unable to completely hide his irritation. “Grab a cooler or a bin.”

“Okay”, he replied setting his rod down on the dock.

Within a few minutes, all of the gear was dispersed to the appropriate points on the dock, and it was time to load the boats. The canoes had become customized over the years. Stainless steel eye hooks were bolted to the gunnels to accommodate securing lines for the gear. Greg had even relocated one of his canoe’s thwarts to accommodate the large 90 gallon meat cooler.

Loading the canoes was systematic and efficient. The packing plans had been carefully worked out and all cargo had been test packed a few days prior. John, Greg and Mike loaded the canoes
as their partners handed down the gear as called out for. The major gear went in exactly as planned. Everyone was allowed one personal bin and the water containers, coolers, propane tanks, gear bins and foods bins were distributed among the boats in a pre-arranged manner. David was already loaded, and he chatted with the support group, taking in the tangy salt air and sinking sun.

“You need to take this”, Greg said to Mike handing him a bin.
“What the hell are you talking about?”
“We forgot this one when we test packed.”
“You take it.”
“Look at my canoe.”
Mike looked and saw his point. They were all overloaded.
“Son of a bitch. Alright give me the damn thing.”
Mike jammed it in front of him and thought, “So much for leg room”. It would be a couple of days before supplies ran down some and that could be alleviated.

The miscellaneous extras still remained on the dock. Several gallon water containers, thirty twelve packs of beer, fishing gear and the day packs would go wherever they could fit in nooks and crannies and on top of the secured and tarped equipment.

“Here comes the fun part”, John declared, eyeing the already heavily laden canoes sitting low in the water.

To the untrained eye, the final loaded canoes would appear haphazard and overloaded. Overloaded they were, but not even close to haphazard. To the group they were a work of art. Every necessity including all cooking, washing and drinking water had to be taken, and ten days was a long time. Of course there were also a few “comfort goods”, but space was limited. The key was to maximize the load without swamping the first couple of days. It would get better as supplies were used up.

The sun was getting low and they were just about ready, the four boats in the water and packed. Three seventeen foot canoes and the old johnboat with its ancient six horsepower motor.

“Kodak moment?”, Greg asked Mike.
“Of course.”
“You ready to change?”, Greg asked Karen.  
“Pictures first”, she replied.  
“What about you?”, Mike asked Trevor.  
“You guys look like a bunch of rejects from a Rambo movie”, he replied. “Someone has to bring some style.”  
“Style we have”, Mike replied, getting a smile out of Karen as he looked her way. “I have no words to describe you. You did get my packing list, didn’t you?”  
“Yea, yea”, Trevor responded. “I just want to look good heading out. This isn’t my first time in the fucking woods you know.”  
“So you’ve said”, Mike replied. “Let’s do this and get moving.”  
“George?”, Greg asked, looking at his brother as the group formed a line. Trevor and Karen stood out in contrast to the rest who were dressed in an assortment of tan and green camouflage military garb.  
“Sure”, George replied taking the two cameras. “Y’all look like a bunch of military rejects”, he laughed as the group lined with the bay and far treeline as a backdrop. “Well, most of you”, he added. He clicked two off and handed the cameras back to Greg and Mike.  
“Be right back”, Karen said, heading off to the bathroom with her change of clothes. She emerged minutes later, now dressed out in similar gear and was the last to hop in, joining John in the front of his canoe.  
“See you in eleven days”, George said.
The photos were shot, the goodbyes said, and it was time to get moving.

Chokoloskee Bay still had a light chop with a slight breeze, the afternoon winds having been calmed by this hour. It was a slightly falling tide and about an hour run across the bay. There would be a little light after that and they should be in the river before sunset. The canoes were heavily loaded, so even the light chop needed to be reckoned with. However, this was far from the first venture and lighthearted anticipation of the trip prevailed.

“Why don’t you start out on the right?” Mike said to Trevor, referring to which side to paddle on.

Trevor nodded acknowledgement and the canoe slowly accelerated out of the mooring.
“Which way are we headed?”, Trevor asked after a couple of strokes.

“Off to the right aways”, Mike replied.
Trevor switched sides and started paddling on the left.
“What are you doing?”, Mike asked.
“We’re going right aren’t we?”
“Eventually, but what does that have to do with anything? Paddle on the right.”
“I was trying to help steer.”
“That’s my job. You just provide power and I’ll take care of the steering. If I need you to do anything different, I’ll let you know.”

This was a bad sign. Switching sides to steer with both paddling on the same side were signs of a pure novice. It was obvious that Trevor did not have the first clue as to the dynamics of power and balance in a canoe and did not understand the first thing about steering a canoe. The steering part didn’t matter; Trevor would never see the stern of the canoe. At this point, however, the instability created by both paddling on the same side could be a real problem considering how low they were in the water.

Mike felt a splash of water, and caught a laughing John out of the corner of his eye. Promptly slapping the water with the paddle and returning fire, he laughed and gave Greg a shot to boot. All the tensions and hassles of getting started were now completely lost and a brief water war ensued, with all involved, except for David who had pulled slightly ahead. That out of their systems, they declared a truce and headed off toward the southeast.

David, in his johnboat with the small six horsepower motor, had already pulled substantially ahead. He had not been on any of the previous trips, but was an experienced navigator and knew the direction of the river mouth. They had really wanted David to be part of the group, but the only problem was that he had lost an arm in an accident years ago. What David brought to the table was his experience in the wilderness and deep knowledge of the
backcountry ecosystem. He was one of those people that could be “one with the land”, living as part of it. As it is virtually impossible to paddle with one arm, the solution was a small johnboat with the minimal outboard. Despite the substantial monetary settlement David had received for his injury, the outboard was old and not exactly in prime shape.

David’s motor did not sound good, coughing and sputtering to a peak and then silence. Not a good omen. The others were certainly capable of towing David’s boat in an emergency situation, but to start out this way on a ten day trip was not exactly what they had planned. They had a hundred and twenty miles to go with nothing except for wilderness. He was able to re-start the engine twice, only to go a short distance before the engine died again. Soon Greg and Derrick were at his side, working on the motor. They knew what they were doing and the rest of the group tightened up the gear, watched and cracked open some beers. Mike took the opportunity to switch a few things around to get some legroom while he watched. Those two could do amazing things with unusual materials on motors and he was fascinated by their ingenuity.

The fuel filter was leaking and had water inside. After cleaning it out, they jury-rigged a waterproof casing utilizing a plastic bag and duct tape. After a couple of pulls, the motor sputtered back to life, and while sounding a little rough, it did not stall.

“Think that will do it”, Greg declared.

David muttered to himself, obviously upset. “I’ll pull ahead and find the river, it’s getting dark.” He shook his head and headed off the general direction of the river entrance.

They were still out in the middle of the bay and had lost well over a half hour due to the delay. They would not make the river entrance by dark, and could only hope to at least sight it before they lost the light. The four veterans Greg, Mike, John, and Derrick had only taken one trip up this particular river, and the shoreline at a distance could be deceiving in daylight, let alone dark. The direction of the river was nothing more than a dim, distant line of trees with no discernable features. Finding the river was
far less of a problem than using the shoreline features to avoid oyster bars.

Greg stated, “We should take a more easterly direction and then parallel the coast to the river”.

Mike simply nodded as he quickly concurred, thinking the same thing. They needed to get closer to the shoreline to avoid the mid-bay oyster bars. “David”, Mike shouted above the thumping of the receding motor.

As David turned to look, Mike motioned left. David understood and the craft began a slow turn to the east.

Approaching the shoreline, the light was already dimming and the breeze dying. It would get real buggy soon, so they turned a course parallel to the trees about a hundred yards out. This should be far enough out to avoid the sunset insect onslaught, and close enough to stay in the channel. After fifteen minutes of paddling, a large indentation up ahead in the tree line appeared to be the river entrance. Unfortunately, at the same time the mosquitoes discovered their presence. Before the entire hoard zeroed in, the group quickly turned directly out into the bay and paddled out some distance from the shoreline. This maneuver was successful, and only a few followed as the characteristic hum in the trees faded with the extra distance.

“What do you think”, Greg asked Mike as they glided to a stop in the open water.

“Well, I think that is probably the river”, he indicated pointing off to the southeast at the indentation in the trees. “Let’s take a bearing and then hold out here until dark to avoid getting chowed”.

“I agree, besides if that’s not it, we’ll hit the dead end at the far side”, said Greg.

“Exactly”, Mike nodded. “There’s nothing before that that could possibly be the river.”

Anchors dropped and the boats tied together, it was time to relax and wait out the sunset insect fiesta.

“Piece of cake”, said John.

“The only problem will be finding the river”, said David.
“We’ll find it”, said Greg with confidence. “That’s not the problem. The problem is avoiding the oyster bars.”

“Beers?” asked Derrick opening a cooler, pulling seven out, as it was an academic question.

“Need you ask?” replied Karen.

Greg pulled out a small plastic bag filled with organic material and proceeded to roll one.

“I thought you guys were a bunch of fucking rednecks”, Trev- or remarked, watching the effort.

“What the hell are you talking about?”, Mike asked.

“You guys smoke pot?” Isn’t that against the redneck credo or something?”

“What in the world are you talking about?”, Mike asked. “You’ve known me for a long time. I’m a child of the sixties if anything. I was a rebel before the whole sixties rebellion thing even started. What’s your problem?”

“It’s just that all this camo, the swamp and, well you know.”

“I don’t know. I would suggest you just shut up.”

“But...”

“Trevor. Drop it; you’ve already made an ass of yourself.”

Karen, playing the diplomat said, “Trevor, we’re people; nothing more, nothing less. We love coming out here, but that doesn’t mean we live in some sort of bubble.”

“Fuck, it’s just, well never mind.”

“This should be a little more interesting than last year”, stated John, changing the subject.

“Did you bring your Shamu poncho?”, Mike asked, causing Greg to lose it mid-sip, beer spewing forth, hitting Derrick at the front of his canoe. Timing is everything.

“Too bad Joe couldn’t make it this year, but I don’t think we’ll be seeing him again”, said Derrick eyeing Greg, but with a grin.

“What’s with Shamu?” asked Karen.

“Last year a cold front hit as we were heading out to Pavilion Key and the temperature dropped from the seventies to the for- ties in a matter of minutes”, Mike explained. “We had taken the inland route to Watson’s Place and when we hit the mouth of the
Chatham River we were going to decide whether to head out into the Gulf and camp on the keys, or return inland. It was around seventy five degrees, beautiful, no wind, the water was flat and it was a unanimous go. Unknown to us, a cold front was approaching, and it hit when we were still two and a half miles from Pavilion Key. It got real nasty, real fast; two to three foot seas, stiff headwinds, driving rain and dropping temperatures.”

“I would say that was the roughest canoeing I have ever done”, stated Greg.

“Me too”, Mike said. “Joe should have known better, but for some reason he did not bring a jacket, even though it was February. The only thing he had was this souvenir Shamu poncho from Sea World. The poor guy froze his ass off the last three days.”

“He asked the rest of us if we had extra jackets”, laughed Derrick.

“The rest of us were dressed in winter gear, and he was walking around freezing, looking like a tourist at Sea World”, said John with a chuckle. “Cold, rain and wind the last three days.”

Karen laughed, and David, knowing the story, just shook his head with a smile.

“What an idiot”, said Trevor.

The veterans of these trips knew you had to be prepared for anything, anticipated or not. On a five day trip it was a terrible inconvenience; on a longer trip it could have been far worse.

“How about that shark?”, Greg asked.

“That was a big son of a bitch, a good six feet from the dorsal to the tail fin”, Mike answered.

“Shark?” Trevor asked with a little concern in his voice.

“Yea shark”, Mike said. “You do know what a shark is, don’t you?”

“Of course I do, but this is Everglades Park and we are in canoes.”

“This was out in the Gulf”, Greg explained. “We were paddling across a deep pass between islands. There are lots of sharks out in the Gulf.”

“Six feet long, that’s a big fish”, Trevor said.
“That’s just between the dorsal fin and the tail”, Mike said. You need to add two or three feet depending on what type it is.”

“That was spooky”, Derrick said. “It was really rough and he just swam alongside us the whole way across.”

“Just waiting for one of us to swamp, and easy dinner”, laughed John. “I wonder what kind it was.”

“My guess is a hammerhead”, Mike said. “The dorsal and tail fins were pretty big and it had a bit of a brownish tint to it. We’ll never know for sure, but I’ve seen them diving before and I’m fairly certain.”

“There are plenty of those in these waters”, David said.

“It was close enough for you to tell that?”, Karen asked.

“It was definitely interested in us”, John said; “Maybe thirty feet off.”

“Shit”, Trevor said, followed by a moment of quiet contemplation. He had read a few canoeing magazines to help prepare for the trip. None of them said anything about sharks.

“What do you think?” asked Greg, talking to nobody in particular.

“Let’s do it”, Derrick answered.

The darkness was complete and the moon glowed thirty degrees above the horizon to the east. With the boats untied and anchors up everyone watched with a little apprehension as David went to start the old six horsepower outboard. He leaned over shook his head and gave it a pull. It started, and the now familiar thum, thum, thum was the only sound in the still night.

As it turned out, the river was where they had surmised. The moon was all they had anticipated and more. Once the eyes became adjusted to the faint light, the riverscape became amazingly visible. There was little current and the water was flat, and silent. In the middle of the river the stars and light of the moon reflected a shimmering path. The river was wide at this point and the banks lined by the tangle of roots of the red mangroves. There were coves and overhangs where the light could not reach and the darkness was black. Not the soft darkness they have become
 accustomed to in the “civilized” world with the ever present background light, but pitch black, deeper than the void of empty space. There was a slight tang of salt and decay in the air.

They slowly paddled mid-river, the hypnotic beauty of nature at its finest having a calming effect. Mike’s mind was empty and open to nature, an animal on a simple journey, calm and peaceful. The water became shallow on the inner sides of curves and “paddle probes” revealed a hard sand bottom. It was time to get out and walk.

“Time to get wet”, Mike said quietly stepping out of the canoe.

“I hear that”, said John as he and Karen hopped out onto the shallow sandbar.

Greg and Derrick stayed on course out in the river a couple of yards off of the sandbar with David following in the distance, the low thum of the motor the only sound.

“Wadda ya doing?”, Trevor asked. “Aren’t there gators, snakes and shit like that in the water?”

“Don’t worry about it”, Mike replied grabbing the bow line to tow the canoe. “That’s why we wear camo. They’re attracted to gold chains and fake Rolexes.”

“Fuck you”, laughed Trevor.

“Sit back and enjoy the ride”, said Mike. “You’ll have plenty of time to paddle.”

The depth was about a foot to eighteen inches on the first sandbar. The water was cool, the bottom firm and mostly devoid of the sharp oysters. Footgear consisted of military issue Vietnam jungle boots which offered protection, but those oysters could be nasty. This type of walk, however, was nice. It required a lot less effort to move on, John and Mike towing the boats with the bow-lines in the placid water as Karen walked between them. They did not minding getting a little wet, in fact, they actually looked forward to it. As a sandbar would end, they would hop back in and paddle until they hit the next one. Having experienced the occasional wrath of brackish water alligators, while nothing was said, attention was paid to the dark waterscape.

The sound of David’s motor grew louder as he approached
from the rear. The canoes stopped as he pulled alongside Greg and Derrick.

“I’m going ahead to start setting up camp”, David said to Greg as he glided to a stop and grabbed the gunnel of the canoe.

“It’s not where it’s shown on the chart”, Greg said to David, who had not been up the river before. “Hang back with us, we have to find it.”

The notation “PA” on a chart indicates “position approximate”, and that is definitely the case with this campsite. It is shown at a major bend in the river, however, it is not there. They knew that from last years’ trip and proceeded further upriver in the faint light, all now back in the canoes. Flashlights scoured the right shoreline as the group slowly paddled upriver past the bend. If they missed it, they would spend an uncomfortable night in the canoes, get chowed by insects at sunrise and have no place to cook breakfast. Meals are important.

As it turned out, the site was easily visible from the river, even in the moonlight. A break in the treeline and visible earth at the riverbank revealed the location. One by one the boats pulled up to the bank and tied off in the trees lining the shallow water.

It was late and time to set up camp. David and Derrick set up the kitchen area at one of the old wooden picnic tables, first lighting up the campsite with one of the propane lanterns. Greg and Karen brought their own little tent and the rest shared Mike’s ten foot by ten foot tent. Mike directed the tent setup with John and Trevor’s help as Greg and Karen did the same with theirs. There was little unnecessary conversation, and the tasks were quickly accomplished.

Mike and Derrick started a small campfire to relax and dry the boots as Greg dug into the cooler. A snack, a little whiskey and some pleasant conversation were in order. It was too late to go through the ritual of cooking and cleaning, so the planned “destination meal” consisted of cold cut and cheese sandwiches.

Under the light of the propane lantern Greg simply declared, “Food”.

Nobody’s arm needed twisting and all headed toward the old
weathered picnic table. There was no discussion as the meal was hastily consumed. While the jog was only five miles, it had been a long day starting early in the morning. Loading all the gear and canoes takes a while. Then there is the two hour drive, the permit process, unloading and loading the canoes with the gear. You are tired before you start, but that goes unnoticed with the adrenalin that comes with the anticipation of such a journey.

Sandwiches devoured and beers in hand, everyone headed for the small circle of camp chairs surrounding the campfire.

“Well gentlemen and lady, here’s to the trip” toasted Greg as he cracked open the first bottle of whiskey.

“Here here”, replied John as he nodded his head and raised the beer in his hand.

“I just hope that motor holds out”, said David shaking his head, still adorned by the weathered cowboy hat.

“Be optimistic”, Mike replied. “Besides, we have all been through some shit together and we’ll deal with it”, eyeing Greg as making the statement. “I have been through more intense situations with this guy than I ever imagined.”

“Remember Turner River?”, replied Greg, having taken his swig and passing the bottle to Mike.

While they had been down Turner River a number of times, he knew exactly what Greg was talking about.

“That was definitely the most intense storm I’ve experienced in a canoe, and I’ve been through a lot”, he replied. “We were both still checking each other out at that point and we deliberately took a trip down the Turner River on a day a major front was coming through.”

“So what happened?” asked Karen, now in command of the bottle.

“You’ve been through there, haven’t you?” Mike asked.

“Sure, I know it”, she replied.

“Well, normally the first tree tunnel you hit has a four to six foot clearance from the water to the branches above”

“It was intense”, Greg elaborated. “First of all, the river was flooded and we could barely get through.”
“I have a picture of the tunnel entrance”, Mike continued. “It’s hardly a small hole in the trees up in the canopy. We were in Greg’s canoe, so I was in front. Hitting the first tunnel I put the paddle away and put on the gloves. We had to pull through and under the upper branches of the trees, and I brought a small saw, which was needed to cut through a couple of spots. When the front was close we decided to tie up. The thunder was closing in and we knew that was it.”

“And that was when it hit. Nothing to do but ride it out.”, Greg added.

“And you know what this son of bitch had to say?”, Mike said laughing. “If lightning strikes within fifty feet of us, we are fried. And of course that was said at the most intense part of the storm.”

“People say stuff like that”, Trevor said.

“He’s an electrical engineer”. Mike responded.

“Hey, it was a good thing you brought that tarp though”, Greg said.

“Boy Scout training, be prepared. Yeah, the rain was incredible. Even with the tarp covering most of the canoe during the storm, we still ended up with four inches of water in the canoe and got soaked.”

“And it was cold.”

“We both left changes of clothes in my truck and went to the ranger station at Everglades City to change in the bathroom. When we pulled in the rangers saw the canoe on my truck and told us we could not go out in these conditions. When we informed them that they had already been out during the storm and were done, they just looked at us like we were crazy and walked away.”

“They just don’t understand the independent spirit”, replied Greg, and they lifted and toasted each other with their cans.

“They don’t like the independent spirit”, Mike retorted.

“I hear that”, said John raising the bottle, now half full after a few rounds.

“Man, I am shot, I have got to crash”, said Derrick as he rose from his chair to head off for bed. Derrick relished a good nap in
the afternoon and today he had been deprived.

Karen yawned and said, “I’m done too, see you guys in the morning.”

David was sound asleep in his chair, a technique he developed to perfection. Not a bad ability, in fact it is very useful on occasion. After some gentle encouragement and some grumbling, David agreed to head to the tent and Greg, John, Trevor and Mike remained.

“What kind of shitty weather can we expect?” Trevor asked.

“We have got to be prepared for anything from a cold front to summer heat and thunderstorms, squalls, whatever”, Mike replied. “The one thing we will not get at this time of year is hurricanes, but anything else is possible. I gave you the list of clothing needed for a reason. This is no fashion show, it is pure survival gear.”

“Yea, but you guys are all dressed up like GI Joe or something, what’s with that?” Trevor asked. All this camo bullshit, are you expecting a war out here or something?”

“That has nothing to do with it” John said. “The military has tested all kinds of gear for different conditions and has come up with the most practical gear for the conditions here.”

“This country is actually very similar to the Mekong Delta area of Vietnam and the gear developed for the troops that went over there is ideal for these conditions.” Mike said. “The best, most efficient gear has been worked out and there is no need for us to reinvent the wheel.”

“The jungle boots are a real winner”, said Greg.

“And the pants and shirts are apparently made with the insect problem in mind, not to mention the extra pockets that come in real handy”, Mike added.

“You’d think they would make them with better colors though”, Trevor said.

“On that note I think I’m ready to hit it”, said Greg laughing and taking one last sip from the bottle.

He was not alone. The day had been long and the hour late. Within twenty minutes they were all sound asleep.
The campsite the group awoke to is situated on the site of the old Lopez homestead. Originally a small Indian shell mound, it was taken over after the last of the Indians had either been exterminated or driven off into the deep swamps. It is not a large site, but the only ground around for miles. The remnant of the cistern is the dominant feature of the site, the only indication of a bygone era. There is a small clearing with a couple of weathered picnic tables encircled by the jungle like hammock vegetation of the dry ground. The rest of the landscape is dominated by the river and the seemingly endless mangrove swamp.

The only bad thing about canoeing at night is that the next day you generally get a late start. This day was no exception. After a long night it is easy to excuse an early rising while tired and