

A Hundred Leagues Among the Coral Reefs of Florida

A Six Weeks' Hunting Trip
Through the Heart of One
of the Greatest Fish and
Game Countries in
the World

By JAMES LAVENDER

Pitcher with the Chicago Cubs

The following article is an unusual departure for The Baseball Magazine. "We have recorded the brilliant deeds of our national stars so long with the customary setting of grandstand and bleachers that the diamond with all its lights and shades and enthusiasms has become almost a necessary atmosphere to these articles. But we believe the public are interested in their favorites not only in the pitchers' box or on the bases, but also in other scenes and occupations as well. In the following sketch we are pleased to have our readers take a most unusual journey in company with James Lavender, the phenomenal pitcher of the Chicago Cubs, the man who broke Rube Marquard's great winning streak and tied Ed Walsh in a post-season series when the spitball king was at his best. Mr. Lavender in his own easy, unstudied way tells of the adventures which await the fortunate explorer along the northwest coast of Florida.

IN the fall of 1909 after the baseball season was over, I determined to take a hunting and fishing trip along the north western coast of Florida. I had been fortunate enough to make a little money, felt the need of recreation, and as I had always wanted to visit this part of the country, I decided there was no more likely time than the present. So in company with six other young men, I started on what was to me at least a most memorable journey.



We set out in mid December, at a season when the northern states are in the grip of winter. But in the warm climate of the gulf there is no snow to hide the deer tracks or ice to freeze the trout streams. Occasionally there is a touch of frost in the early morning and perhaps Southerners feel the unexpected cold more than their northern neighbors do the far more rigorous temperature of New England and the Great Lakes. But for the most part the so-called winter

season of Florida is about the finest time of the year. Its only drawbacks are the heavy rains which are likely to come at any time and which mar an otherwise ideal climate. But no locality yet discovered can boast of being perfect, and the climate of northwestern Florida in that favored region which borders on the great gulf of Mexico is about all that can be desired.

We started our little expedition from that famous old city in Franklin County, Apalachicola. This is a town of about 4000 inhabitants situated at the mouth of the Apalachicola River. The city has a very extensive harbor separated from the gulf by a series of long, low islands which form a broad bay many miles in extent. The foundation of all this country is coral or shell formation, though there are extensive sand dunes which are cast up by the action of the sea and the wind. The barrier islands off Apalachicola are long, low ridges of sand which offer little protection from the winds of the gulf, though they serve to break the force of the sea. This formation of barrier islands has brought about an unusual addition to the industries of the city, for the bay is admirably adapted to the growth of oysters, and Apalachicola has thus become the center of the oyster industry for the whole gulf region. The bottom of the bay is not in all cases suited to the growth of these shell fish, for the oyster needs firm, hard ground to grow well. It does not flourish on soft sand for in such conditions the sand is liable to shift with the action of the tides and smother the oysters. The bed of the river itself, however, which has been washed free of shifting sand by the action of its own current combined with the ebb and flow of the tides is practically bedded with oysters. Here the old oystermen can be seen in great numbers on every fair day tonging the shell fish. They work from narrow, flat bottom boats using a pair of oyster tongs which are much like two rakes working on the principle of a pair of shears. These rakes which are manipulated by their long handles, scrape the oysters from their bed with their iron teeth. It looks like easy work, but it takes a good deal of knack and experience as well as some strength to tong oysters. In addition to

gathering the oysters from their native element, part of the industry of the town centers in their preparation for market. Owing to the climate, the oysters are seldom shipped in their natural state, but are usually removed from the shell and canned. The so-called cans are nothing more than wooden kegs or pails set one within the other. The inner can will contain about five gallons of oysters, and is separated from the outer can by a packing of ice. Thus prepared, oysters will stand shipment to distant parts of the country.

While Apalachicola is the headquarters of the trade, it does not depend alone upon its picturesque oyster industry. It is as well the center of a great fishing section, for the neighboring waters abound with various species of edible fish. The most numerous variety seems to be mullet. Great quantities of these fish are salted and shipped to all parts of the country. The Gulf is noted for its shrimp. Apalachicola also shares in this industry, and shrimp are one of its most valuable exports.

It was in this most interesting fishing community that we hired a very serviceable launch called the Ella. This launch was well adapted to an extensive cruise along the coast. It was forty-two feet in length with a broad beam and a most commodious cabin. The principal means of locomotion was a forty horse-power gasoline engine taken from an automobile. This proved a very serviceable device in every way, so that we were never at the pleasure of the tide or the wind in a region where the tides are not swift and where frequent calms prevail.

Our little ship furnished an ideal home with the added novelty that we could move it from place to place as suited our fancy, and we did move it from place to place on this cruise for more than three hundred miles down the Florida Coast away below Tampa, clear to the confines of the dismal Everglade country. Our launch drew only forty inches of water and was specially constructed for navigating the treacherous waters of the gulf with their many narrow inlets and shallow lagoons.

This whole coast is bordered by a strip of shifting sand bars which extend for three-quarters of a mile from the shore

at low tide. These bars in themselves are most interesting places, and I spent many pleasant hours in wandering over them. There are no clams in the gulf, the same as those which grow along the north Atlantic coast, but great numbers of oysters were scattered everywhere while crabs, shrimp and almost every conceivable form of marine life abounds. The oysters furnished us with an inexhaustible food supply which could be had at any time for the mere labor of gathering. But, while such a welcome resource in itself these oysterbeds caused us no little anxiety at times. Although our craft drew little water in comparison with her length and breadth, we frequently went aground on a sand bar in the shallows of the ebb tide and would be stranded for hours at a time. If this happened on the smooth surface of the sand, it did no more than cause us considerable temporary inconvenience, but we were unfortunate enough on several occasions to get thus stranded on extensive beds of oysters. The sharp edges of these oyster shells which grow in every possible shape and at every conceivable angle cut like glass and left their mark in no uncertain way on the paint and wood work of our launch.

As might readily be imagined, we had many interesting adventures on this voyage, but I lack space to tell them all. A good deal of our time, as I have said, was spent on the water in gathering oysters, various species of shellfish, and in fishing. But our voyage was twofold. We expected to explore the waters of the coast and did so, but we were no less interested in the coast itself.

This whole country is much cut up by streams, many of them of considerable size. At practically all of the important streams we would anchor our little ship and, taking the small boat which we always towed with us, we would ascend the stream as far as we could and strike out into the open country in search of game. No part of this region is at all thickly settled, although there are a good many fair-sized towns on the coast itself. The entire interior of the country, however, is still little more than a wilderness. The nature of the landscape is, on the whole, rather monotonous and hardly varied enough to be interesting. The

country for the most part is extremely low and level. There are practically no hills though there are many gentle slopes much cut up with marshes. In fact, the whole country is but little elevated above the sea level and is broken by extensive swamps. The high land, such as it is, is generally wooded, chiefly with yellow pine, which often grows to a great height. These trees make the best of lumber and furnish about the only industry which the interior supports, a growing lumber trade. The soil is not generally adapted to agriculture, being light and sandy for the most part save on the banks of the streams or in the marshes. In these places, where it is damp all the time, there are groves of cypress, magnolia trees, and live oaks which often attain an immense size. Many of the interior lakes and streams which penetrate to a considerable distance into the mainland are bordered by these trees whose intertwining branches form a complete canopy over the water. What makes this dense timber all the more impenetrable is the luxuriant moss which hangs from every branch and completely covers these gigantic trees with a false foliage. There are many tidal rivers which are hardly more than lagoons, long narrow inlets from the sea, but such of the streams as are genuine are not muddy as might be imagined, but have a clear, firm, white sand bottom, while the current is remarkably clear and cold. It flows from natural springs farther inland. These deeply wooded glades offer some charming bits of scenery, but there is a taint in the very atmosphere which mars the perfect harmony of the scene. And this false note, which jars so much because everything else is peaceful, is the life which abounds in these sheltered valleys. For the waters of the streams are made interesting but hardly inviting by the presence of great numbers of the deadly moccasin snake of the Indians. These poisonous reptiles may often be seen swimming on the surface or else coiled up on a log or even in the branches of the overhanging trees where they love to climb to warm themselves in the still sunlight. There are also many great, sluggish alligators which may be seen lying fully extended in the shallows on the edge of little bays or inlets, or

stretched out at full length on the rippled crest of the sand bars. Some of these alligators attain a great length and I have seen several which measured more than fifteen feet. In addition to its reptilic life, there are great numbers of birds of all kinds and colors which are continually flying about and making their characteristic outcry from the deeply matted branches overhead.

So much for the interesting but gloomy depths of these heavily timbered lagoons. The interior of the country which is dry and rather desolate (for the barren soil supports little underbrush and only the lofty pines seem to flourish), has also its native population of wild life.

Chief in point of interest are the deer which still roam this region in numbers as yet little reduced by the ever-increasing incursion of northern hunters. It was deer that we wanted mainly, and we were unusually successful.

In my many excursions into the interior I was fortunate enough to bag seven fine deer. The strangest part of my deer hunting was the fact that I killed them all with an ordinary Remington shotgun, the same gun, in fact, that I used in quail shooting, only in the case of the deer I used buckshot and found it a remarkably effective weapon.

There are also in this region a considerable number of bears, though we did not encounter any in our travels, while foxes and coons are very common. Rabbits are extremely plentiful and squirrels are everywhere. There is, in particular an interesting type of this animal called the fox-squirrel. It is fully twice as large as the ordinary grey squirrel, the largest species of that animal to be found in the north. Fox-squirrels are rather remarkable in the great variety of their color. I have seen some of these pretty animals almost entirely black with a white head; others reddish with a black stripe down the center of the back; others almost entirely grey, and still others practically white. Although they live in trees and make their homes there, the fox-squirrel prefers to remain on the ground if attacked. It runs with surprising speed, and I have seen one give a dog a chase of nearly a mile before taking to a tree. It is this remarkable speed,

I suppose, as well as their great size which gives them their name of fox-squirrel.

This region is also the home of many exiled members of that famous southern quadruped known as the razorback. These hogs are not wild naturally, but have strayed away from the civilizing influences of the domestic hearth and relapsed into their native savagery. A razorback is like any other hog, but he doesn't look it. He has an immensely long nose which is extremely useful to him. If it were not that this nose were so active and so well equipped by nature the unfortunate animal would have ever more of a razorback than he has. He is, of course, very thin. His back is long and high and sharp pointed which gives him his characteristic name of razor. True wild hogs are dangerous animals to meet. But these razorbacks are not, for they will usually run from a human being. The native population here, such as it is, keep a rough ownership over most of these hogs in a rather ingenious but, on the whole, serviceable way. They employ the same methods which the ranchmen of the northwest have used for decades, namely: branding their animals with the mark of the owner. Thus, when one of these natives shoots a hog, he can tell by the brand on the animal whether it belongs to him or to one of his neighbors. Whether or not he confines his shots wholly to his own particular property, I have, of course, no means of knowing. We have long had the cattle kings of Montana, perhaps some day we may have the hog kings of Florida.

There are great numbers of bird life throughout all the forests of Florida, the principal edible kind being quail. These birds are so numerous that it is a simple matter to shoot them almost anywhere and at any time.

But there is another inhabitant of these regions whose presence is by no means so welcome as those whose habits I have outlined. This creature is the rattlesnake. These snakes are rather common and give a spice of danger to a hunting excursion which would otherwise lack that adventurous spirit. Rattlesnakes generally do not grow very long, but they do attain a large size. When a rattlesnake has reached a length of five

or six feet he is generally through so far as height is concerned, but he keeps broadening out indefinitely. A rattlesnake of this length will frequently be five or six inches in diameter and exceedingly heavy and strong. Although they are so common in this country and so frequently met with, a rattlesnake is universally dreaded. His bite is almost inevitably fatal.

It is this everpresent element of danger lurking under foot which is the one great drawback in this otherwise delightful region. A hunter never knows when he is going to encounter one of these poisonous reptiles and while ordinarily the odds are all in his favor, still there are plenty of possibilities that he might be able to do little in self defense. A rattlesnake practically never pursues a person, but he will not run from a man either. The danger lies in stumbling over one of these snakes unawares and being bitten before realizing the danger. It is needless to say that we made a practice not to wander about in the open country at night. A man needs his eyes as well as his wits about him when he is invading the home of the rattler.

We frequently encountered these reptiles coiled up sunning themselves. The only favorable thing about a rattlesnake is the fact that he is not by nature quarrelsome. He is rather a dignified animal and never bothers anyone unless he is bothered first. Even then he has to coil before he can strike. It is commonly supposed that a rattler uses his rattle as a note of warning. I have nothing to say on this point, as I do not know whether he does or not. It seems more reasonable to suppose that he uses his rattle to show that he is angry in much the same way that a dog growls when he is similarly indisposed, but I will not argue the point. I have, however, heard a rattlesnake sound his peculiar war note or warning more than once, and it is a rather disconcerting experience. The noise, as everyone knows, is made by a natural rattle which grows at the extreme tip of the tail. When the snake coils he elevates the tip of the tail and shakes it violently. It is this vibration which gives a rather harsh sound somewhat like the rattling of dry peas in a paper bag. That is, there is nothing

metallic about the sound. It is hollow and wooden.

When a hunter hears this sound it means that it is high time for him to seek another locality. The rattler is very exclusive in his company and generally resents the intrusion of a total stranger. In my excursions into the interior I always wore high leather leggings but this was as a protection against the heavy underbrush rather than against the rattlers. I cannot state it on my own experience, but I have been told that the rattlesnake in attacking a man universally strikes high. The fangs which contain the poison are situated in the upper jaw and are long and flexible and readily controlled by the muscles of the jaw. When the rattlesnake has coiled for the attack he will leap from the ground, straightening his body and driving it as from a spring. He strikes with the poison fangs on the upper jaw fully extended. The fangs themselves are the most extended part of his body and the first to come in contact with any object toward which he is directing his attack. These fangs are hollow and carry death with them from the poison glands which are situated at their base. A rattler practically never strikes a man below the knee, generally as high as the waist, so that leggings would be of no special protection against him. The only safeguards we could employ were to keep an alert watch and never, if we could possibly avoid it, travel in the dark. I have said that a rattler is generally of a peaceable disposition, and this is so. On one occasion I saw a dog jump completely over a large rattlesnake who was sunning himself on a stump. The dog was chasing a rabbit so intently that he didn't see the snake at all. On this occasion the rattler showed no signs of anger and the dog kept on entirely oblivious of the fact that he had been treading so lightly over so great a danger. But I did see a dog get bitten once by one of these reptiles and it was not a pleasant sight to witness. The poison fangs seemed only to touch one of his legs, but they did their deadly work. His leg immediately swelled to two or three times its normal size and turned green. The whole body swelled to twice its size and the dog died in a very short time evident-

ly in great pain. I am not sorry to say that I killed fourteen of these undesirable citizens on my various trips, blowing their heads off with ordinary bird shot.

The rattlesnake does not like water and lives almost always on the dry ground. Moccasins, however, are typical watersnakes. I had an odd experience with one of these venomous reptiles on this same trip. We laid up at one of the coast towns for a day or two, and I hired a negro to guide me up one of the neighboring streams looking for ducks. This stream was rather narrow and bordered with huge cypress trees which in places completely overshadowed the water. I sat crouched in the bow of the boat with my gun over my shoulder while the negro paddled from the stern. We came to a low overhanging branch which I did not particularly notice. I merely ducked my head to escape hitting it as we glided under, and the muzzle of my gun struck the branch a slight blow. Instantly the negro yelled out, "Lawd, God, Boss! What a snake!" Before the last word had left his lips he rolled over backwards into the water. I looked over my shoulder and saw a three foot moccasin in the bottom of the boat. He had been lying full length on the branch warming himself in the sun, for the water I found out a moment later was icy cold. The instant my eyes rested on him he started to wriggle along the bottom of the boat toward me. I could not shoot him without blowing a hole in the craft, so, as the negro had already set me a good example by going overboard out of the stern, I did the same over the bow. The water was about four feet deep, and, as I mentioned, remarkably cold. But, for all that, it was much more welcome than the presence of a water moccasin. The negro, however, at a safe vantage point in the stream bed attacked the snake with the end of his paddle and speedily finished his earthly career.

These inland streams were the scene of a good many odd experiences. I remember on one occasion we anchored our launch at the mouth of what looked like a particularly noble river, a vast sheet of water extended before us apparently for miles into the main land and seemed at least two miles wide. We

had had too much experience with mud banks and sand bars, however, to venture into such unknown waters with our launch, so we embarked in our skiff and paddled up the river some little way, finally running aground on a long point which led at once into the timber region. We spent the day in deer hunting with a variety of interesting experiences, but the most surprising feature of the excursion was our return to the skiff. Instead of the wide river of the morning we saw at the distance of at least half a mile over an interminable area of mud and sand a narrow channel winding in and out to the ocean, which appeared far off beyond a long series of sand bars. Our launch was high and dry at the mouth of the little creek and our skiff, as I have said, at least half a mile from water. There was nothing to be done save to wait for the return of the tide. So we sat down on the bank and told stories for several hours while millions of gnat flies made life extremely interesting for us.

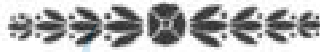
We expected to prolong our excursion down to the very depths of the Everglades, but paused on the verge of that dismal country and started for home, as we had been gone much longer than we had anticipated. On this far southern coast of Florida we had some rather unusual adventures which added considerably to the spice of the journey. Myriads of ducks and geese settle in this part of the world in the winter in the numberless lakes and marshes of lower Florida. Ducks were plentiful enough and easy to kill but I found the geese a much harder proposition. I found a rifle the best weapon for a goose. While I am not a particularly good shot, I did make some rather long kills with my Winchester. I remember one big grey goose that I managed to get at a distance of over a thousand feet—not a long shot, I imagine, for an expert, but good for me. It was in the game waters of the upper Everglades that we found some of the best fishing of our trip.

A popular type of fishing along this shore is for the great tarpon which is one of the gamest fish in the sea. We did not try for tarpon, as we did not have the necessary outfit, but we caught a considerable number of seabass and

mullet, which tasted good fried over the little oil stove which we carried in our cabin. One of the odd looking animals of this section is the sea turtle. These animals crawl out on the edge of the sand bars to sun themselves when the tide is rolling in over the shallows. I was particularly anxious to have one of these strange sea creatures if possible and tried a number of long shots with my Winchester in the effort. But I could never get near enough to them to make my fire effective, though I have seen more than one of them come to his senses

suddenly and flounder off into deeper water at a particularly heavy broadside from our little armament.

Our home trip was merely a repetition of what I have already tried to describe, though, of course, we came back much more quickly than we went. It was with genuine pleasure that we steered the *Ella* once more among the oyster tongers of old Apalachicola for we had just completed what was by long odds the most interesting journey I have ever made into one of the greatest fish and game countries in the world.



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