

Into Florida

the Heart of the Everglades



An Interesting Little Journey
Into the Greatest Swamp in
the World With Some Other
Things Which Happened in
a Three Months Hunting
Trip in Southern Florida

By NAP RUCKER

Nap Rucker has long been considered one of the greatest pitchers in the game. In the choice of The Baseball Magazine he ranks without a superior in the National League. And for the mere reason that he is so prominent in baseball circles, his adventures have an interest of more than normal weight. The Everglades of Florida have been, for centuries, one of the most picturesque and mysterious regions in the civilized globe. There is always a spice of adventure in an exploring tour into an unknown wilderness, and for this reason we feel all the more certain that our readers will enjoy the following sketch by the great Brooklyn star.

FLORIDA has always been to me a country of inexhaustible prospects to the hunter. This is true of a wide strip of territory throughout the entire length of the peninsula, but particularly true in that vast wilderness of the extreme southern part which is generally known as the Everglade section. Here little has happened since the first European settlement to change the appearance of the country, and although I believe Florida was settled earlier than

any other state in the Union, much of its territory is still an unbroken wilderness.

My native town of Alpharetta, Georgia, is not very far from the Florida border line. Ever since I was old enough to own a rifle or shotgun, hunting has been the greatest sport in the world for me, save only baseball, and since baseball is rather more than a sport in my case, a profession, in other words; hunting has become my favorite recreation. There is good bird shooting in the vicinity of my own home, Southern Georgia. I have spent many pleasant days

tramping through the woods with my gun, but of late years I have turned my attention more particularly to the far richer game region to the south, and last winter it was my good fortune to take a trip into the very heart of the Everglades themselves.

In recent years the Everglades have attained an almost national celebrity as a section of vast agricultural resources. Various projects have been offered to drain this great area with a view to creating thousands of acres of the richest farm land. Some day I believe the project will go through, but at present there are thousands of square miles in lower Florida which are nothing but a dismal succession of low ridges, submerged valleys, and gigantic swamps. All lower Florida has but a slight elevation above sea level. Originally the whole country was a coral reef and the foundation of the peninsula is coral now.

My father-in-law had a sawmill on the very edge of the Everglades which is one of the most interesting places I ever visited. It was a typical southern lumber camp where practically all the labor is done by negroes. Many stories have been written about the swamp-crows as they call the negroes who join a big contracting crew and spend month after month in the heart of the cypress swamps. These lumber camps are hardly on that par, but rather a wild locality a good many miles from any settlement. The nearest settlement was Fort Meyers on the Caloosahatche River, and we seldom went there except after provisions. There were some fifty negroes working in our camp and it was a picturesque sight to see them gathered together in the evening and enjoying themselves in their simple way. They build themselves little cabins of logs which they cut in the woods much the same as they used to do in the old plantation days before the war. Here, after a hard day's work cutting and hauling in the swamps, they would gather in the evening, some old man would have a banjo and they would dance and sing for hours at a time. This supplied them very well with excitement during the week but on Saturday nights, in anticipation of a holiday, they would have to celebrate a little more and most of them would get drunk.

There is a peculiar section of country

in this vicinity that the people call the prairie. It is a level plain, treeless and sandy. The game consists mostly of large flocks of quail which can be had anywhere for the effort of going after them. I know one morning I shot sixty-five quail in a space of about two hours. This prairie, however, is a very treacherous piece of country owing to the large number of rattlesnakes which make it their home. Florida rattlesnakes, at least in this vicinity, grow to an enormous size. I know I was out hunting one morning in a scrub of palmetto and shot a quail. I sent my dog into the swamp after him and a moment after I heard the peculiar rattle of a snake. In the tangled underbrush it was impossible to see him and I did not dare to move for the rattlesnake sounded so near that I thought I might step on him if I stirred. It was so sudden and unexpected, and startled me so much that I could not be exactly sure of its direction. However, the dog didn't seem to have as much respect for the sound as I had for he continued tramping about in the underbrush and the snake once more sounded his rattle. It was then that I got a glimpse of his head poised above the coiled body, moving slowly to and fro and I blew it off with my shotgun. It was one of the most enormous snakes of this kind I have ever seen. I did not measure it because the head and several inches of the neck were blown to pieces, but I will give you an idea of its size by another incident which happened on the very next day.

My father-in-law and I decided we would go for a rather long excursion across this prairie. I may say that this section is all of seventy-five miles in extent, treeless, though with a fine growth of grass on its rather light sandy soil. Although the country is almost as dry as a desert, there are a number of small lakes and ponds and around their edges there is always a dense growth of palmetto. We drove in a wagon into the very midst of this prairie region hoping to find ducks in some one of the numberless small ponds in the interior. While we were driving along we disturbed a huge rattler which started off trailing sluggishly along the ground. We concluded he had lived long enough and proceeded to terminate his earthly career.

We measured him carefully and found he was six feet ten inches long, but he was not so large, by several inches, as the snake I had shot on the previous day. We took this rattlesnake home with us and had one of our lumber camp negroes skin it. I have the skin now in my possession, and it is an interesting sight to a person who is not familiar with these reptiles. A rattlesnake of that length is of really great size owing to the fact that the rattler naturally is very bulky for his length and does not normally grow very long. This rattlesnake had swallowed a rabbit entire, so some idea can be formed of the size of his throat. These two snakes were the largest I have ever seen alive, though my father-in-law shipped one to me last winter which measured seven feet six inches in length. This was one of the largest rattlers ever killed in that vicinity. He had one of the negroes skin it and shipped the skin to me, knowing that I was interested in such souvenirs of the locality, but some one of the express office employees must have got hold of the package in transit and cut off the rattles and several inches of the skin, so that it was much mutilated when it reached me. I do not know how many rattles this snake had and I was much interested to learn, for the number of rattles determines the age of the reptile. In both of the other skins which I saved, unfortunately the entire tip of the tail had been either broken off or worn away so that only the larger rattles remained. The theory in regard to these snakes is that they add one rattle each year after they have attained an age of two years. The greatest number of rattles that I have ever heard of a snake possessing was thirty-two. I did not see this snake myself so I will not say anything about its truth.

From the first day I arrived in this lumber camp I made up my mind to explore the Everglades. In the very center of this great section is Lake Ochechobee. This is a large body of water, roughly circular and about thirty-five miles across. It is the home of millions upon millions of ducks and geese and various other kinds of aquatic birds. To reach the shores of this lake it is necessary to make a long and extremely monotonous journey through the endless

swamps. The Everglades as I saw them were ridges but little above the surface of the water, while in between the ridges were submerged valleys and in many cases wide sheets of shallow water. By following the ridges as much as possible a hunter can explore this great section with a light wagon. I am sure this is the pleasantest method although even this is by no means a picnic. There is nothing like a road. The ridges are made even rougher than they ordinarily would be by the presence of millions of fallen trees, stumps and bushes. The water between the ridges is deep in many places and fords have to be selected with a good deal of care. We struck one place I know, where we thought the wagon was going to tip over and jumped out to escape capsizing our little craft, landing in water up to our necks. The explorer needs a diving suit more than anything else in passing through the Everglades. What makes things more than usually entertaining is the fact that there are more water moccasins than in any other place in the world I think, and to see them scurrying in every direction as we came crashing through the underbrush with our horses and wagon was an exhilarating sight. The moccasins are not as bad as the rattlers on several accounts, but they rank with other undesirable citizens and are the biggest menace of this section. Moccasins are not as bad as rattlers because they will not stand their ground as a rattler does. They will invariably run from a man, nor are they so large or so poisonous. A rattlesnake is a very dignified animal. He is not aggressive, but he will not move. He will always stand his ground and his bite is almost always fatal. Particularly is this the case with the tremendously large rattlesnakes which live in lower Florida. The larger the snake the more poisonous his bite. One of my dogs got bit on the leg by a rattlesnake and he recovered, though it was necessary to instantly cut the bitten part out with my hunting knife. The dog didn't seem to be particularly pleased with this operation, but if he had known as much about rattlesnakes as I did, he would have been only too willing to put up with the temporary inconvenience. There is a good deal of talk throughout this country as to the best cure for a rattlesnake bite, but I do not

think there is any cure known, so good as immediately cutting out the bitten place before the poison has time to get into the blood. The slightest delay here will be fatal. Incidentally, I don't think that outside of comic papers anyone puts much faith in alcohol as an antidote.

I say the water moccasins were the only undesirable citizens in the Everglades, but this is not strictly the case. The traveller who is tramping along over the ridges one minute and splashing through a water-soaked valley the next, will oftentimes be startled by the sight of a huge alligator stretched out in the mud perhaps opening one eye and looking at him in a dazed sort of fashion. Of the two I would prefer to take a chance with the moccasin rather than with the alligator, for I have seen some of these big brutes which were at least fifteen feet long and I didn't go any nearer to them than I had to. But in the winter time for some reason or other that I do not understand, they do not seem to be dangerous. It makes little difference how hot it may be, they spend the major part of the winter in a sluggish sleepy condition, much the same as a bear does when he dens up for the cold weather. I say it makes no difference how hot it is, for on one of the excursions I took into the Everglades although it was the first of December, the thermometer stood at ninety-eight degrees in the shade. Hot as it was, however, the alligators which we encountered remained as rigid as logs of wood, and if I had not known how much they enjoyed tropical weather, I would have thought they were overcome by the heat. But you can't hurt an alligator with heat, he dotes on it. No alligator, according to my knowledge of the subject ever yet died with a sunstroke, but it seems to be the nature of the animal to vary his life not so much with the temperature, as with the season, consequently they are practically harmless in the winter. It was a long and tiresome journey, as I have said, to reach the shores of Lake Ochechobee, but we finally kept on going until we arrived. And it was one of the most dismal sections of country I have ever seen without a doubt.

Much of the water in the Everglades is an overflow from the sea, and salt as the ocean itself, though there are great sheets of fresh water among the ridges.

Lake Ochechobee itself is shallow and a rather forbidding looking body of water, though (I am told) there are excellent fish in its waters. There must be great shooting if a person has a boat or a dug out canoe at his service, for I believe there are more ducks and geese there than in any other part of the world. It is an ideal spot for them. Another interesting inhabitant of this region is the great white heron. These birds are known to the outside world for the plumes they have furnished to the milliners. The aigrettes which have become so valuable are merely feathers from these herons. A strict law has been passed against shooting herons now, for they were fast being exterminated by the hunters in the employ of large millinery concerns. The heron is not by any means a pretty looking object, being shaped much like a crane, with extremely long neck and legs, but his feathers have been prized for years. This is a favorite breeding place of this species, and they were very numerous. Their harsh cries might be heard through the scrubby timber in every direction and in certain places we passed through on our journey, they were so numerous that we could see them splashing in the shallow water or flying with their long loping sweep of wing from ridge to ridge.

Dismal as the country is it is not wholly unsettled. For centuries the Everglades have been the camping ground of the Seminole Indians. In the days of Andrew Jackson these Indians caused a great deal of trouble and held out against the federal army for years. They could go where a white man could not, and, secure in the fastnesses of these almost impassible marshes they defied for a long time the whole force of the United States Government. But eventually, of course, they were brought to terms and most of them settled in other states, though there is still a rather large band of the survivors of these old Seminole tribes which inhabit a section on the western shore of Lake Ochechobee. The government appropriated a strip of country here for a reservation and made every effort to civilize these Indians, but they continued to prefer their old habits and steadfastly refused to submit to the customs of their conquerors. At one time, many years ago, the state department at

Washington sent carpenters to this reservation and built frame houses as dwellings for the Indians, at a great expense of time and money. The remains of these houses may yet be seen slowly decaying and falling to pieces through the lapse of time, for the Indians would never live in them. They preferred to spend their time in the open air, in the rude shelters they had known before the Spaniards discovered this coast in the time of Columbus. When I visited this lake there were nearly eight hundred Indians in the little colony. They were supported by the government, but spent most of their time hunting and fishing just as they had done for centuries. They were peaceable people if left undisturbed, and the sole residents of this vast section. It is impossible for me to tell in detail all the experiences that came my way in the more than three months I spent with our lumber camp as a base of supplies, but there is one little incident that struck me as being of peculiar interest at the time, which will perhaps bear telling. As I was nearly as much interested in fishing as I was in hunting, I took a long trip to the seacoast west of our own encampment. Here in an indentation of the coast called Lemon Bay, I had some peculiar experiences fishing. The water was hardly more than two or three feet deep and as we drifted about in a shallow flat-bottom boat, the whole water was alive with fish. They swam to and fro in every direction, thousands upon thousands of them. We could not catch them with a hook and line for they absolutely refused to bite. We could have caught them with a net if we had had one, but we didn't. We might have picked them out of the water with our hands if they had not been so slippery. Finally I thought of my old Winchester which was lying in the bottom of the boat and decided to see what I could do with that. My father-in-law blazed away at them with a shotgun, but the shot scattered so much when it struck the water that it didn't seem a very effective weapon. However, my rifle proved all that the doctor ordered and before I was through I had a fine mess of fish. This is hardly the usual custom to go gunning for fish with a Winchester, but I assure you it can be done.

We had an excellent launch at one time

in which we explored a good deal of this coast. She drew two feet of water and was specially built for the shallows along this shore. In one of the lagoons we encountered a porpoise and drove him into the shallows. He went puffing along at a great rate, jumping completely out of the water and I took a long shot at him with my rifle. I think I hit him though he was splashing the foam so much that it was pretty hard to see, but in any case he wriggled out of the difficulty by crossing a long band of shallow sand bars, in some cases wriggling over dry sand. Eventually he got into deep water and disappeared. To one who likes the out of doors this is a region of inexhaustible delights for there are so many kinds and types of wild life, and you encounter them under circumstances so unusual, that there is a continual charm about it always fascinating to the hunter. It was with genuine regret that I left it even after a space of more than three months spent at our old lumber camp, and I assure you I shall go back to these old hunting haunts again whenever the opportunity offers.

In my opinion, Florida will some day be a great state for its climate and its resources offer inexhaustible prospects to the settler. As for such districts as the Everglades, however, I should not advise anyone to involve themselves deeply just as I would counsel anyone, on general principles, to stay clear of an investment in real estate so far removed from his home. It is a simple matter to get out circulars in the manner of some of the great land companies who advertise so extensively in the magazines, and so far as I know projects of this kind may be fair enough. In fact, I know nothing, either pro or con, of their value. But this I do know that while there are sections in Florida of immense fertility there are other vast tracts that are fitted for nothing else in the world other than the scattered pine timber that grows there. The rich mud of the Everglades might make the most fertile soil in the world if properly drained and no doubt all this vast region will some day be reclaimed from the wilderness, it is to-day, and has been, for all I know, since the first Indian came to stand on its stagnant shores.

The population of interior Florida is

very scattered and for the most part the natives are poor farmers who live a precarious life on what they can raise from an unproductive soil. Much of their wealth, oddly enough, is comprised of the herds of Razor back hogs, which they lay claim to. These hogs are allowed to range wild in the woods, picking up their living in their own peculiar way and judging by the look of the country from an eating standpoint I do not wonder that they are so lean and hungry looking. The way in which these farmers keep tabs on their property is by either branding their sides in much the same way that western cattle men brand their cattle or by slitting their ears in a peculiar way. The owners then whenever they need material to make their characteristic bacon go out into the woods with their long

rifles and shoot a "hawg." And they are good shots, many of them too, for they were born with the love of the chase and the fitness to make good in it.

Next season I hope to explore the coast down farther to the south in the direction of Key West.

When I come down here again I want to investigate some of the great fishing which abounds in the sea everywhere, for there is a vast fishing ground all along the shore of the peninsula. And in a way I believe there is as much good sport on the fishing grounds as there is on the mainland. But I will learn of that later, for in spite of its rattlesnakes and its moccasins, in spite of its alligators and its mosquitoes, Florida is a fascinating game country, the greatest I have ever seen.

