

JANUARY 24, 1985

Bad weather has delayed my return home from Florida. Temperatures have dropped from the 80s down to the 60s. At this time, I'm stranded at a resort hotel in Naples on the Gulf Coast that has indifferent valet parking and only fair room service.

Swimmers and tennis players are backed up in the lobby waiting for the pool to warm up and the courts to be freed. Lots of whiteheads and greybeards are registered as guests. I don't know whether they are old of just under strain from the unpredictable weather as they spend their days playing golf and swatting tennis balls.

Before the weather broke, I spent one afternoon walking in a portion of the Audubon Refuge that's about 30 miles from my hotel. The reason I say "a portion" is because the refuge is composed of 11,000 acres. I overheard one of the guides complaining about the limits of the area, so I suppose bird fanciers are like hearders, they want everything they can get under deed or on lease.

On purpose, I ignored their guest book at the main gate. I wasn't going to take a chance of blowing my cover. These Audubon guys can make a Texas sheep rancher skip rope so fast that it'd make a circus bear think his hind legs were out of joint.

For over 20 years I've watched the score on the little tiffs we've had with the Audubon people and the Sierra Clubs over eagles and coyotes. We'd have been better off entering our pickups in the Indianapolis races than matching them. Anybody who thinks they aren't dedicated to the cause of fur and feathers had better rush down to the emergency room to see just how far his skates have run off their tracks.

Over on the Atlantic side of the state a few days before visiting the refuge, I'd been shown a bald eagle's nest that was 10 feet in circumference. Awful strong gales hit that part of Florida, but I'll bet the wind doesn't ever get high enough to blow a momma eagle or her eggs out of a nest that wide.

The driver of a tour bus that was taking in the Space Center was the one who pointed out the big nest. Things had got pretty dull until then, so to add a bit of fun, I asked the old boy sitting next to me whether he knew if bald eagles slept on their stomachs or their backs. He acted like he didn't hear what I said. His wife did sort of smile and look up at the bus roof. For the rest of the trip I could hear them clearing their throats above the noise of the road sounds. If he hadn't been so stuck up I'd have told him about some of the rooms I rented when I was in college that weren't as big as that eagle's nest.

Swamp walking in the Audubon Refuge was like having a special part of nature under a microscope with a projector-size field of vision. Over two miles of board walks wind through and over and around pools of delicate green ferns and ponds covered in aquatic plants so thick that the small blue herons can pick their way across them.

Otters and squirrels rustle around in the undergrowth. Loons call and hawks screech their warnings that man is near. White ibis and common egrets glide in tight landing patterns. Tiny chameleon lizards race across sun streaked boards, and ominous alligators stare from the dark water. Cypress trees reach high for sunlight yet are rooted in the mud and water of the swampland. People passing through honor the beauty in hushed groups far removed from the chrome and plastic world they have temporarily left behind.

It takes a whole lot out of a man, traveling in all kinds of weather and never knowing where he'll be sleeping the next day. I may wait and try to catch a headwind home even though I am traveling on an airline. The next time I have a question about an eagle I'm going to check my audience.