

11SHORTGRASS.DOC

Being last in the line entering Everglades Park allows time to search for the Senior Citizen's Pass to National Parks in my billfold. Be warned ahead; if you are nearing the age for a pass, don't expect rangers to spare a welcome smile for grannies and graybeards on a free ride to the whole park system. Must be because so many of us flock to national parks.

One hundred fifty yards past the gate, 15, maybe 20 alligators float around in a swamp pond. Remember the kid back at the motel in Everglade City confirmed that pythons kill alligators. Not now, but sometime — put it down — humans will be allowed to kill pythons, and not with kindness but with, say, a magnum smokeless cartridge fired from a blued steel chamber, or double-aught buckshot from a full choke double-barrel 12-gauge shotgun.

Clouds and cool weather reduce attendance today. The line is short to buy tickets on the rubber-tired tram to ride into the park's interior. Once ticketed, the ranger gathers us underneath an arbor for a briefing on park rules before boarding.

She harps on "no smoking" longer than necessary. It might be because visitors later in the season long for

black leaf stogies or burley primed briar foggers to keep mosquitoes back enough to be able to see from the tram.

From the crowd's looks, probably the best restriction would be to forbid showing grandchildren's photographs. The park ranger looks like she's 10 years old compared to her audience's mean age. She concludes in feeble levity, "If your hat blows off, I will try to retrieve it unless it falls close to a snake."

Same as tours through other national parks, the speech indicts the encroachment by man. In the Everglades, irrigation to the north takes away water badly needed for the swamplands. For a final touch, add the salt water seeping into the Everglades from the Gulf coast. Also put in boat propellers scarring manatees until the old sea cows must look like they are branded.

But don't expect to use this information to campaign for nature club president. Notes written from an open-air tram, with wind whipping across an aisle strong enough to tighten the chin strap on my travel hat, wrinkle the tablet pages in creases and folds to make a box kite's tail look starched as a Dutch girl's cap.

Across the aisle, a lady's kneecaps extend too far to allow crossing my hind leg for a prop. At the sight of every beast from 14-foot alligators caked in mud to little

blue herons still fishing in a pond on one leg, comes on
"How cute!"

Halfway, the tour stops at a lookout tower by a mossy pool to give an overview of miles of parklands. Once my breath returns from the climb, I count 27 huge alligators on the banks. I estimate 15 or 20 square miles are visible in four directions.

It would be impossible to cross such winter-brown savanna wilderness, dotted with dank waterholes for alligators to wallow and potted into slimy swamps for mosquitoes to hatch so thick they shade the sun.

As the last to descend the tower, the vastness becomes more overwhelming alone. Appreciation strikes in the form of no powerlines, pipeline rights-of-way or asphalt roads from any point. Only unspoiled brown-leafed treetops stretched across horizons streaked by a blue, smoke-free haze over the full thrust of a 2000 square mile park.

Near the tower stop, bike riders mount to continue their exploration, many with baby seats over the back wheel. It's nothing unusual nowadays to see a swaddler strapped to a father or mom's chest on a hike or bike ride on the way to a campsite.

On the last lap, the tour moves faster. Ponds show off more baby alligators than the other route. No one knows how

many alligators live in the park. Five hundred thousand is a wild shot for the whole park, from maybe tabulating the wallows, or analyzing the drags turning down grass off the banks.

I need information on the American crocodile. But the ranger brushes the question off with a short reply:

"Crocodiles are shy and hard to see down in the Flamingo part of the park. American ones aren't aggressive like their Nile counterpart."

More freeze damage shows near the end in the open meadow-like expanses. I wonder how many on the tram realize orange groves are dying at this moment from the freak cold spell. The grocery store in Everglades City still sold tree-ripe oranges as late as this morning.

Back at headquarters, I share half a sweet orange with the mean kid in the next seat. He may not know a Florida freeze-burned orange from a Georgia pumpkin jack-o-lantern, but he sure knows how long it's been since his lunch.