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For protected Florida turtles with tasty flesh, it hasn't been a good year. And Cedar Key has not been kind to the . . .

SUWANNEE COOTER

Hunting restrictions may not be working for 'streakynecks'

CEDAR KEY — In the mid-morning heat, three researchers crawled on what appeared to be an endless sea of bones and trash.

In what looked like an episode of "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation," they wore latex gloves, collected methodically, and found marks on the remains that would mean nothing to a layperson, but spoke volumes to them.

"Here's a female. Looks like she's been hit by a machete, her sides butchered in."

St. Petersburg biologist George Heinrich held up a severed turtle plastron, or underside. "There's marks on her belly from a gator."

"Another rib," said one researcher.

"Skull!" called out another.

For protected Florida turtles with tasty flesh, it hasn't been a good year.

In February, a mass grave of more than 200 gopher tortoises, expertly and illegally butchered for their meat, was found in a residential area of Leesburg. Wildlife officials had never seen anything like it, but said their investigation turned up no leads.

Last week this group of researchers traveled to Cedar Key, on the Gulf Coast, to collect the piled remains of another state-listed "species of special concern": the Suwannee cooter.

In the late 19th century, Suwannee cooters were so abundant in the rivers and streams feeding the Gulf that their black-and-yellow bodies covered "every stump and hummock almost as thickly as shingles lie upon a roof," one observer wrote.

But lately, the turtles — dubbed "streakynecks" by some locals — are far rarer. Several years ago scientists recommended a ban on hunting them. But Suwannee cooters were so loved as food in some places that the state fell short of protecting them completely, banning the sale of their meat but allowing a two-turtle-per-person take in a shortened hunting season.

The scene last week suggested it might not be working.

Within hours, the researchers bagged about 100 butchered Suwannee cooters, most of them large females. The bones filled the back of a van, making it smell like a musty cave. Just off the wooded state road leading to Cedar Key, dozens — if not hundreds — more cooters are left, strewn amid cans, broken appliances, dog toys and other detritus of man.

The researchers would surely have to go back. Not least because they were out of bags. Cedar Key, for all its charms, was never a great place to be a turtle.

As one of the last marine turtle fisheries in Florida, its fishermen brought in the ever-scarcer greens and ridleys that fed in its grasses offshore.

Thousands of diamondback terrapins, which live in surrounding marshes, were collected at Cedar Key. That trade was banned in 1995.

The town's history museum displays tiny models of turtling boats, and a photo of Bessie Gibbs, the longtime proprietress of the Island Hotel, grabbing a sea turtle by the fins. "Turtle soup tonight!" reads the caption.

But then, Cedar Key was never a great place to be any living resource. In the 1880s, when it had a bustling port and was the second-largest city in Florida, a pencil factory was built there.

Within a few years, its cedar forests had been stripped for pencils. Then its oyster fishery imploded, and its palm forests collapsed from the over-harvesting of palm heart buds — the main ingredient in the Island Hotel's famous (and still served) heart of palm salad.

By the turn of the century, Cedar Key had become something akin to what it is now: a pretty, low-key fishing town, attractive to tourists for its quaint throwback ways.

In previous eras, scientists could freely kill hundreds of animals to study their physiology. These days they mostly make do with dead ones acquired willy-nilly. So a mass grave, even of a protected species, has its fringe benefits.

The turtle researchers crawling around the bones last week vacillated between delight and disgust at their find.

"Oh God — it's complete carnage," said Heinrich, the biologist. Then, in the next breath: "It would be cool to find a site like this of alligator snappers."

Chalky white domes — old cooter shells — poked out of the earth. Heinrich dug around their edges with a beer bottle, pausing now and then to wipe sweat off his head.

"Should get a number of papers out of this," said Tim Walsh, the collections manager at the Chelonian Research Institute in Oviedo. Walsh plans to piece together the cooter skeletons, measure and label them all, and discover something heretofore unknown about the species — how their skulls change as they age, for example.

"You hate to see something like this," said Walsh, filling up a bag, "but this kind of stuff can be very useful."

Moreover, he added, "we might find Jimmy Hoffa out here."

The digging went on for hours. As the number of bags grew, so did the questions: How were the turtles caught, and where? Who eats these things anymore? Didn't they know it was illegal to take so many?

Across a short causeway, Cedar Key was quiet. Airboats sat in many driveways, and clam tumblers in many front yards. After a ban on net fishing nearly collapsed the town's economy, some residents turned successfully to clamming, a fishery they can control and renew.

Others, like Johnnie Squires, still depend on the bounty of the sea. Squires, one of fewer than 20 crabbers left in town, said things are harder now in Cedar Key, with the influx of wealthy people buying condos on its shore and the government's more aggressive approach to regulating his industry. He got his first ticket ever this year for a violation with his crab traps, and a few years back, a wildlife officer busted up his Suwannee cooter-hunting trip.

He and his friends and his son have long dived for the turtles, he explained, in the clear waters of a handful of rivers — Blue Run, the Rainbow River, and the Wacassasa River. The turtles swim in slow circles, and aren't hard to grab. They are kept alive in moistened cloth sacks, and taken to the same out-of-the way place to be butchered.

"The older people depended on them to eat," he said. Now, he said, "it's more a recreational thing. You got to be brave enough to dive with alligators in the water."

"I've never got to go," said Linda Squires, his wife. "It's a guy thing."

As for cooter meat, both Johnnie and Linda Squires said it's delicious. It's so good, they said, that you don't have to do much to it — just a little flour and salt and pepper. The eggs, they said, make a good gravy.

Archie Carr, the famous Florida naturalist, wrote in the 1950s that near Cedar Key, local esteem for Suwannee cooter meat "is profound and reverent and by no means unjustified." But even as late as the '50s, it seems, there was plenty to go around. "The sunning aggregations of this race are the largest I have ever seen," Carr wrote. "They must number in the hundreds, since they sometimes completely cover several cypress logs in a single jam."

Some whole rivers now host only a few hundred.

Dale Jackson, a biologist with the Florida Natural Areas Inventory, said it's possible years of hunting played a big part. The large females, like the ones found in the dump, "are the most desirable ones to collect for food," and quite scarce these days in rivers. Jackson had pressed state wildlife officials hard, in the late 1990s, to limit the take on the turtles.

"If you take big females," said Jackson, "you can decimate them in a hurry."

Know Your Cooters

Cooters, and their close relatives, the sliders, are common turtles in Florida's fresh waters. The name cooter is said to come from "kuta," the word for turtle in several African dialects. Here are the types:

SUWANNEE COOTER: Found in drainage areas of rivers that feed into the Gulf of Mexico from Hillsborough to Gulf counties, with spiral-like yellow markings on its shell. It is the largest of Florida's cooters, growing to 17 inches, and the only one with legal protection.

FLORIDA COOTER: Smaller than the Suwannee cooter, topping out at about 13 inches, found in the Panhandle and northern Florida.

PENINSULA COOTER: Found in lakes and slow-moving streams throughout the state. It is one of the most frequently seen turtles, often basking on banks and logs, or crossing roads. Its shell is brown with yellow lines radiating to the sides. It grows to 15 inches.

SOURCE: News-Journal research

Did You Know?

Naturalist John Muir, who founded the Sierra Club, walked to Cedar Key from Indiana, later chronicling his journey in the book "A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf."

"A numerous class of men are painfully astonished whenever they find anything, living or dead, that they cannot eat or render in some way what they call useful to themselves," he wrote in October 1878 while bed-ridden in Cedar Key with malaria.

The illness left Muir, the first advocate for American wilderness, time to ponder mankind's place in the universe.

"It never seems to occur to these far-seeing teachers that Nature's object in making animals and plants might possibly be first the happiness of all of them, not the creation of all for the happiness of one. Why should man value himself as more than a small part of the one great unit of creation?"

— Virginia Smith