

Trapping Pocket Dinosaurs
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Our baby ranch domicile borders on one of Florida's Great Black Swamps, surrounded by a township-county containing nearly 200 lakes of assorted size and circumference. Connecting these large bodies of water, some stagnate, are standing areas of water, some dark and brackish, called canals or moving swamps and bayous. Needless to say this is a very wet, marshy, humid bathroom area for central Florida. Unlivable to many. But human beings are a strange lot. On nearly every bit of sand with an elevation of 6 feet or higher from sea level, there perches a sub-division of colorful homes surrounded by, yes, mans downfall; expensive golf courses and air conditioned club houses with all the goodies for the very rich and the wannabes.

Has this naughty civilized intrusion eradicated all forms of wild life? Ha! Not an iota. In fact the area teems with strange forms of critters crawling, walking, and sneaking around day and night. The beautiful, loving cared for greens and rolling hills of lush grasses of the golf course and country club actually attracts all these critters in the wild food chain from the top to the bottom; from black bears and panthers and coydogs down to the lowly 'possum, armadillos, pocket gophers, and round-tailed muskrats. (Yes, round tailed. Have you examined your muskrat's tails lately?) I will discuss the gophers and the round-tails and some others in a coming article. Look for them.

Regularly, in my position of over-seer and king for life of my Black Swamp, I inspect and examine local greens for nasty critter control and neighbor public relations.

I go there to mingle with the rich and famous but not to strike a tiny ball with a funny looking stick, but to examine the pretty carpet-like greens for sign of the "Intruders". I make this walk through the grounds in my three-piece suit as many of the club members are also members of P.E.T.A. and I must walk a fine line so as not to disturb any "bunny-huggers".

My keen intuition tells me that on certain nights, in certain kinds of weather and temperature and humidity, certain types of critters will be abounding and I must be aware and alert for a call from my "master".

My walk takes me far from the "cooler" past the tenth hole where my sharp eyes denote many small holes all over the landscape, like 6-inch bomb craters with dirt and sod piled beside the fox hole. Peering into said holes I see nothing but a 6-inch deep crater. But I know one time last night there was a mole cricket or other subterranean grass-roots eating bug down there crawling along his merry way, eating roots and singing his tiny songs of pleasure; sounds and smells that only the "Intruder" can monitor as he strolls through the darkened park-like area. The famous "Nine-Banded Armadillo" was here and was hungry and the bug was his; his long sticky tongue flicking about like an anteater.

His great front claws dig the bug out in a split second, but woe be to the sod. For he's called "THE POCKET DINOSAUR" and is feared by all groundskeepers. He's also called "Hoover Hog", "Texas Turkey", Road Pizza", "Possum on the half-shell", and "Turkey Dinner". This guy along with the gopher and the eastern mole are responsible for more ruined lawns in USA than any other critter around. Each Armad consumes about 200 pounds of insects a year. That's commendable, but the destructive digging upsets all property owners. So we go "Diller Doggan", chasing Armads in the day time with dogs. Can you picture me and "Ole Yellar", my beagle, chasing Armads down through the club house area, past the rich and famous dining on fresh shrimp from white linen covered lawn tables, my beagle baying like an old coon hound hot on a track. Works for me at \$100 each. I've lost a few, like when we'd reach a deep lake. The Armad walks in and strolls on the lake bottom to the other side. Or he just inhales a deep breath, blowing himself up like a balloon and floats away. Sometimes into the waiting jaws of a gator, we both loose.

Besides a .22 we also use large, strong box traps and snares. Down here some crackers eat them, have for generations. Predators like bobcats, panthers, and bears roll the Armad over and bite into the stomach area, his soft spot. To avoid this horrible fate, the Armad rolls into a ball exposing only their armored backside, 9 bands of hard, stiff, bony plates covered by thin moveable scales that are very hard to penetrate even with a knife. Not unlike the Knight of old and his armor. I've had .22 shorts glance off the backsides. We've caught some weighing up to 27 pounds. In South America some are caught at 120 pounds. Now that's like a Sherman Tank rolling along.

The Armad is usually timid and will run rather than fight. It has very poor sight, but fantastic hearing and smelling. They'll sit up on their rump to try and see about. I have crept up on some and grabbed them by their tail. Never, I repeat never, stand over one and scare it. They'll jump straight up, like a jack-in-the-box, with great power in their fright. They've mashed many guys' teeth out in this jump when the guy stooped down to grab one. Many are road killed due to trucks passing over them and in their fright they jump right up into the drive shaft of the truck. Every day I will see one lying by the roadside struck by a vehicle and left for the turkeys. The Armad and 'possum make up most of our roadkills. Keeps the birds busy cleaning up.

They usually have one litter of kits a year and no matter how many are born, 4 or 5, they will always be of one sex only. Usually they'll have a den deep in the soft sandy swamp area with 2 or 3 exits. They'll live to be about 15 years old if they avoid the roads. Usually stay in the same ten-acre area where they were born. Farmers use their hard shell hide, empty and turned upside down as a flowerpot hanging in a tree. They say the red meat is not unlike rabbit or raccoon, if you like. The only nice thing about them is they don't make any noise in their night roaming and they only hit an area once a month in their travels. The only thing that shortens their life span in this area is the box, the snare, and sometimes, my 'ol beagle and me.