
THE HERPETOLOGY OF SOUTHERN FLORIDA

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Abstract.—A combination of literature, museum specimens, and field data was used to evaluate the morphological and ecological aspects of the 81 species of native non-marine amphibians, reptiles, turtles, and crocodylians of southern Florida. Taking place in a slightly expanded region, the goal of this study was to serve as an update of an earlier treatment of this segment of the southern Florida herpetofauna that was published 56 years ago. Findings from our analysis were interpreted within the context of regional distinction of a herpetofaunal community caught in the midst of peripatric speciation and most recently subjected to the effects of radical human-mediated disturbance to their both ancient and youthful environments, altering for all their evolutionary trajectories.

INTRODUCTION

This work represents the synthesis to two large ecological datasets emanating from two opposite ends of southern Florida. The first dataset by JNL was longterm in scope and was centered at the Archbold Biological Station (ABS) at the southern end of the Lake Wales Ridge and the surrounding areas. This area comprises the northern end of southern Florida and is centered on ancient eastern desert. The second dataset by WEM was intensive in its scope and centered in the southern Everglades and its surrounding areas. This area anchored the southern end of southern Florida and, in further contrast, is centered on extremely young wetlands. A third site, a bridge as it were, connected the two areas—Buck Island Ranch (BIR), which abuts the ABS due east in the “little Everglades” region of the Kissimmee prairie. The ranch provided its own contrast by being much more similar to the southern Everglades more than 161 km away than it was to the Lake Wales Ridge only eight km away. This curious part of Florida from around the north shore of Lake Okeechobee southward is a region whose biota we love dearly and whose future we care much about. For these reasons, we set out on this project in the mid-1990s with two goals in mind. First, we wanted to produce a progress report on what is known regarding the ecologies of the southern Florida herpetofauna, one that has not been updated since the study of Duellman and Schwartz (1958) almost one half century ago. Second, we wanted to quantify regional distinction of the southern Florida herpetofauna with respect to their life histories through the lens of historically recognized forms.

How is the southern Florida herpetofauna

unique with respect to morphology and ecology? More specifically, what species and what traits changed most and the least? Taken together, what does the regionally-differentiated fauna look like as species have evolved to some point in being a distinctive community from which to jump off and colonize new areas?

Hopefully, future researchers interested in the southern Florida herpetofauna, will have a useful base upon which to contribute by adding new data and testing ideas concerning these species and their life histories.

AREA OF STUDY

Southern Florida represents a harsh contrast of subtropical climate and neotropical, West Indian, and north temperate species existing on terrain ranging from a few thousand years in age to more than one million years in age: One that is an archipelago of eastern desert with interdunal pools, and one that is an ocean of marsh with rocky upland fragments, an archipelago of islands forming the Florida Keys, and disturbed habitat throughout (Figure 1a-z).

As a way to better understand the biology of the region we direct the reader to several very useful sources. *Ecosystems of Florida* (Myers and Ewel, 1990) provides a thorough overview of habitats and their components that include our area of study. With respect to the Everglades, Lodge’s (2005) *Everglades Handbook: Understanding the Ecosystem* provides a superb resource for understanding the dynamics of that ecosystem. Lazell’s (1989) *Wildlife of the Florida Keys* ties together its wildlife, its geology, and future. The Keys are about 60,000 years old and have since steadily become smaller as water levels rise, even today. The adjoining

Such are some of the patterns that have made the southern Florida herpetofauna a unique community, have corroborated its evolutionary context, and further defined a community that is susceptible for better or worse to the role of humans that has played and can play during this process. In time, much of our study area will be covered with water, and the slate for many of these species will be wiped clean, and the region we call southern Florida will await a new picture to be drawn by force of evolution with new patterns unknown.

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