



the VERMONT EVERGLADES

by Robert F. Jones

photography by Hubert Schriebl

*If your life has become too fast or distracted,
get thee to a bog or marsh.*

— John Eastman,
The Book of Swamp and Bog

It's good advice. No better natural habitat exists for the study of minutiae. Swamps are slow, secret places, quiet and maybe a bit ominous. They catch and hone your attention. They demand concentration. No babbling brooks or splendid vistas, no roaring, high-peaks winds to distract you. You have to watch your step in a swamp—the bottom can fall out from under you at any







moment, sucking you down into the primordial ooze. There might be a snake sunbathing in disguise on that snag your hand is reaching for. That knobby log just ahead might prove to be the nostrils of an alligator. The mossy rock dead ahead that looks like a good, firm place for your next footfall could be a snapping turtle—a big one...

Thoreau once wrote: "I enter a swamp as a sacred place." But until recently few Americans would agree. Over the past two or three centuries more than half of our bogs, fens, marshes, quagmires and swamps have disappeared under the bulldozer push of progress—drained, filled and paved over to become housing tracts or shopping malls or industrial areas. Through the ages the very word "swamp" and its various synonyms have become code words for horror. Think about it. The Swamp Thing. The Blob. The Creature from the Black Lagoon. The Mystery of the Fens. The Making of a Quagmire. Nowadays, in an effort to reverse this negative imagery, green-thinkers refer to such places as "wetlands." It sounds a lot cleaner, healthier, nicer. But they didn't have to convince me. Since childhood I've been an inveterate swamp rat, a born bogtrotter, warts and all.

One of my favorite hangouts when I was growing up was a small, fetid bog near the Milwaukee Road railroad tracks not a mile from my home in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin. In its bug-infested environs my friends and I played Tarzan and Bomba and Jungle Jim, swung from grapevines, sloshed through the stinky black mud, caught polliwogs, wrestled make-believe crocodiles, and gigged actual bullfrogs whose succulent legs we skinned out and deep fried in a nearby hobo jungle, using an old frying pan rescued from the town dump and some lard swiped from our mothers' kitchens. The deep black water in the swamp's center was home to some very large, very dark largemouth bass, but we never caught one. One hook-up, the bass merely had to dive, wrap the



line around a drowned tree limb, and pop!—instant freedom. In the fall, we jump shot plump mallards in the same flooded timber and flushed snipe or woodcock from the speckled alder brakes that surrounded the swamp. It was a growing boy's mucky, smelly version of paradise.



All of this by way of introducing the Vermont Everglades. You've probably noticed them driving up or down Route 7 between Arlington and Manchester—a sprawl of dark water, cattails and wood-duck nesting boxes on either side of the highway just north of the Arlington exit. The Vermont Glades, a bit smaller than their Florida namesake—80 acres as against 2,560,000. But then again, Small is Beautiful as the ecoactivists tell

us. The actual name of this marsh is the Kesick Swamp Wildlife Management Area. It was acquired by the state in 1994 and falls under the aegis of the Vermont Natural Resources Agency.

"It's still pretty much pristine, a virgin swamp," says Biologist Scott Darling of the Fish and Wildlife Department.







"Not many alien invaders. No phragmites or Eurasian water-milfoil yet, though there's some purple loosestrife probably brought in on tire treads when the highway went through." Purple loosestrife, a tall, rather pretty weed that grows densely in low, wet areas along highways, is a European "exotic" that arrived on our shores before 1850, probably in ship ballast. It produces prolifically, forming dense colonies that crowd out such native flora as blue-joint, cordgrass, cattails and water-parsnip. Most birds and insects won't eat the seeds and muskrats disdain using the stalks, even to build their lodges. Bees suck its nectar, but the honey produced is dark green, though it's said to be quite sweet.

The best way to explore a swamp is by canoe, so last spring *STRATTON Magazine* Photographer Hubert Schriebl and I lugged one down to the quaking banks of the Kesick Swamp for a look-see. It was a cool sunny morning in late May. The hardest part of the journey was finding a way into the place. You can't simply park on the shoulder of Route 7 and drag a canoe down to the nearby water—to State Troopers that's a no-no. After circling the swamp and finding nothing but private driveways leading in to homes perched on the edge of the boggy ground, with the water still hundreds of yards away, we finally found a gravel sideroad which led us in to a house, just short of which a rutted two-track peeled off to our left toward a powerline. From there the trail coursed downhill to a locked gate. Another hundred yards or so farther we could see the glint of water and the roof of an empty cabin. This hunting camp the state had purchased when it bought the swamp. We lifted the canoe, a red Mad River whitewater model, over the gate and carried it down to the cabin.

A couple of muddy, brush-choked trails led to the water's edge. As I bushwhacked in to scout the situation, a beaver slapped its tail on the water ahead of me, and I saw it dive. A flock of killdeer buzzed me, then zipped off in tight formation to circle the marsh before pitching in on the far shore. "This is it," I called back to Hubert. "You're going to love it."

We embarked in the wobbly canoe—Hubert, a world-class



skier, is ill at ease in watercraft, especially when he's lugging his heavy camera bags. But we managed not to capsize. The swamp spread before us—a sprawling glint of shallow, tea-brown water scrimmed with a yellow ruff of ragged cattails. Redwing blackbirds and grackles bounced on the slender reeds and serenaded us in metallic disharmony. Flimsy mats of aquatic vegetation dotted the surface: large islets of swamp smartweed (*Polygonum coccineum*), poked their conical pink flower clusters skyward, fringed with narrow lanceolate floating leaves; round-leaved water lilies with bulbous yellow flowers floated nearby. Swamp smartweed, a member of the buckwheat family, is a preferred food source for deer, muskrats, migratory seed-eating songbirds and, of course, waterfowl. Every web-footed wanderer of the skies from tundra swans and Canada

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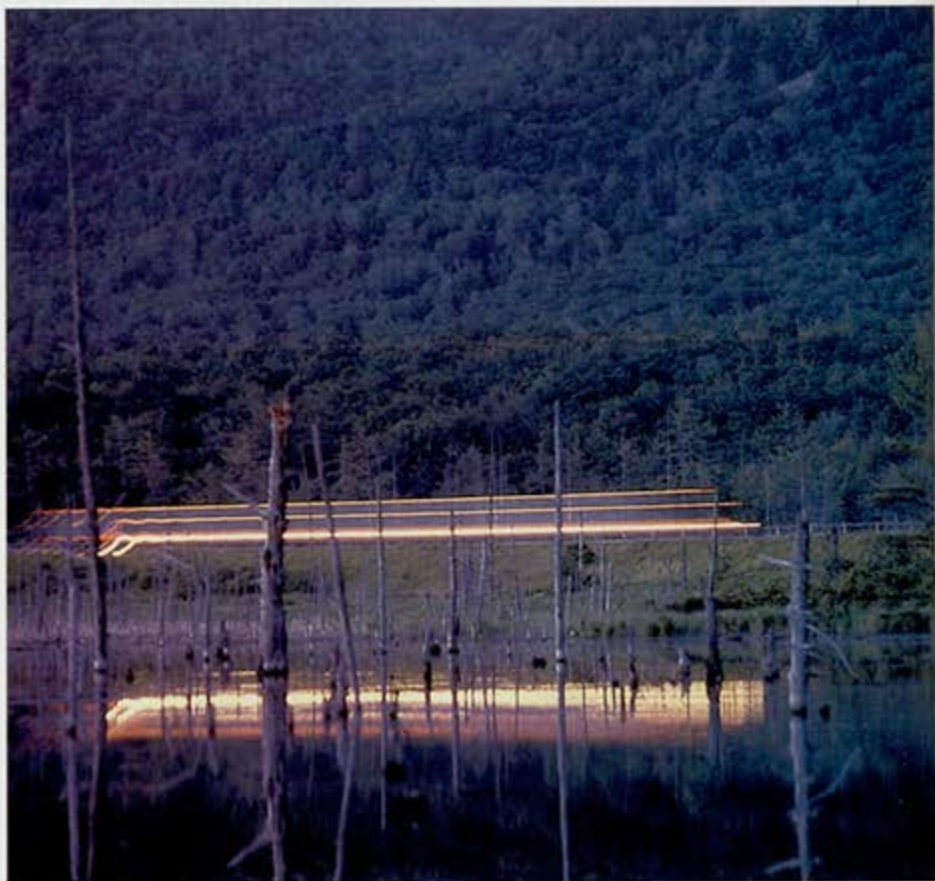
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geese to black ducks, mallards, teal (both blue- and green-winged) and wood ducks will chow down in a marsh full of smartweeds. "Only the bulrushes rival them as a seed source for wildlife," says John Eastman in his valuable guidebook to wetlands lore, *The Book of Swamp and Bog* (available in paperback from Stackpole Books at \$16.95).

The yellow-flowered water lily, I later discovered by consulting my field guides, was the Bullhead Lily (*Nuphar variega-*



tum). Schools of fathead minnows shaded themselves under the lily pads. Muskrats and beaver eat the underground, rootlike stems (rhizomes) of various water lilies, the beavers stashing them in their lodges for winter consumption. Deer and porcupines will grub out the roots and eat them. Moose also love them, and the Kesick Swamp is a preferred sloshing—I mean stopping—place for Bullwinkles on the prowl in the intervals between the Green Mountains and the Taconics. Motorists frequently stop along Route 7 to watch tall, black, bulb-nosed moose foraging hockdeep in the marsh, water lily roots dangling from their mouths like gobs of spaghetti.

The skeletal trunks of drowned trees rose throughout the swamp, and as we paddled around on the fringes of the cattail stands, trying to grab snaps of a pair of Canada geese which kept just out of camera range, I noticed a big, messy nest of sticks wedged high above the water in a treefork. I kept my eye on it, glancing over from time to time, and soon my patience was re-

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warded: a gawky, long-billed, feathered head rose from the nest rim and peered around at the world outside. Soon another head joined, then a third one. They swiveled around and gawped at us. "We're being watched," I told Hubert. He looked over at the nest, grabbed up a different camera lens from his bag, and with eager eyes said, "Let's ease on over there."

They were young herons—great blue herons—and eventually we counted four of them. At first they were quite shy, but soon got used to our presence. I'd spotted a dead trout lying on the bottom, its body torn by the bill of some wading birds, so while Hubert snapped the herons' portraits I rigged us a fly rod I'd brought along and cast a small Adams dry fly, hoping the water might hold some brookies. But the water was already too warm, which I discovered when I stuck my hand in. Scott Darling later told me that brookies used the shallows of the swamp in cooler weather—in April and the fall months—but the lack of rain in recent weeks had sent them back up into the chillier, better-aerated waters of the swamp's Green Mountain feeder streams.

It had gotten quite hot by now out on the water, and with the sun clocking toward the noon hour zenith, we decided to call it a day.

We returned to the Vermont Everglades several times during the ensuing months, both singly and together, and on each visit found something new to watch or photograph or just chuckle at. A full-grown American egret fished the swamp for a while—testament to the species' recovery from the depredations of plume hunters at the century's beginnings, who almost reduced the bird to extinction so that women could adorn their hats with the long, feathery breast-feathers. On a visit in late June, getting on the water at 6 a.m., we found the swamp shrouded in low ground fog. Mount Equinox was hidden in the haze. As we launched our craft—a wide-beamed, flat-bottomed aluminum johnboat this time, a better

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platform for stability and thus for picture taking—a ruby-throated hummingbird buzzed out of the fog, hovered inches from my face, then decided I wasn't quite the flower he'd hoped for and disappeared as quickly as he'd come.

Rowing out toward the heron nest, we flushed a noisy raft of mallards and wood ducks off the water. There were only three herons in the nest this time, but they'd grown to double their size. We never did see the parents. They must have been fishing more productive waters. Later, when the fog burned off, we spotted the fourth heron nestling, already a teenager in bird years, stalking the muddy shallows where the cattails grew, obviously hunting up a nice juicy breakfast of minnows. We rowed over to the wood



duck nesting boxes closer to the highway and found them occupied not by woodies but by aggressive squadrons of tree swallows. The swift little birds strafed us continually, then soared off into the sky to dogfight with one another like so many miniature MIGs.

On the way back in we surprised a female teal—a greenwing, I think—who was towing a string of downy ducklings. She immediately went into the broken-wing trick, paddling frantically away from us, hoping to lure these awesome predators after her while her young paddled with amazing speed to hide themselves in the bankside foliage. On a hummock of decomposing cattail stalks about 20 yards from the

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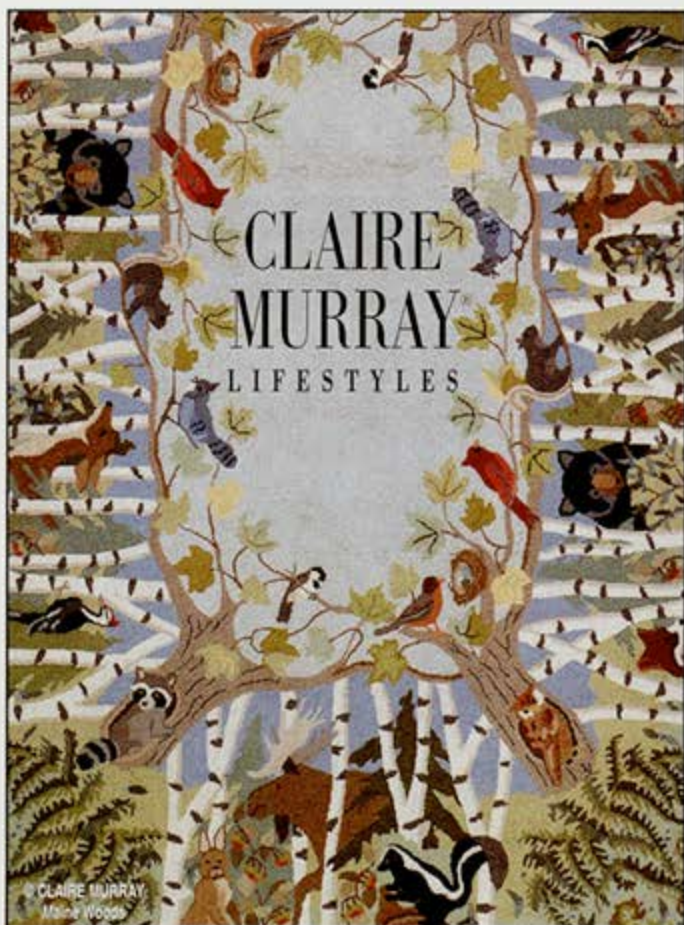
shore, we found a goose nest holding one large, off-white, unhatched egg. Next to it lay the gutted corpse of a black-spotted leopard frog—done in,



no doubt, by one of the many mink that make a living here. Nature at work....

In the fall, Hubert visited one last time and found the vegetative prize of the year—a gorgeous fringed gentian (*Gentiana crinita*), just bursting into bloom. The wild gentian is increasingly rare in this world so hostile to swamps. A small-scale delight, of course, and though we hadn't had any great adventures in the Vermont Everglades—no roaring bull alligators, not a single run-in with a snake, poisonous or otherwise, no piranhas or bog trotters or hulking mossbacked monsters—we emerged from its primordial ooze with heartiest best wishes for the swamp's continued good health and survival. But I still wouldn't call it a "sacred place," as Thoreau did. It was more fun than that. ♦

Robert F. Jones is a novelist and a self-taught naturalist who lives in Rupert. His latest novel, *Deadville*, has recently been published in paperback by St. Martin's Press.



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