

THE EVERGLADES AND ITS WILDLIFE

CARD 1

GROUP 9: NORTH AMERICAN HABITATS



The Florida Everglades is a unique environment. Covering 13,000 square miles of different habitats, it is home to an abundant variety of wildlife, the most famous of which is the alligator.

KEY FACTS

CLIMATE

The Florida Everglades is a subtropical environment that has two distinct seasons. During the wet season of the summer – May to October – rainfall can be very heavy, and the climate is warm and humid. This moisture encourages a multitude of insects, which are a vital element in the Everglades' food chain. The area is also frequently swept by hurricanes, which can cause extensive damage, but they also keep the habitat

and environment in a healthy state of change.

Winter is the dry season in the Everglades. Without rain, the water levels in the shallow rivers and swamps fall drastically. Those animals that cannot migrate to escape the drought, or those that are unable to find a waterhole, may die in the long dry season. Some small reptiles burrow deeply in the cool, moist mud until the droughty dry season is over.



Above: Cypress tree forests depend on heavy annual rainfall.

CONSERVING THE EVERGLADES AND ITS WILDLIFE

The population of Florida has grown enormously over the last 50 years, and with it the demands for water supply. Water is needed for drinking, agriculture, sewage dilution, and industrial purposes. Much of the water in the Everglades is being artificially drained and diverted to serve the urban population. This tug-of-war between man and nature has put the Everglades habitat and

Right: This cottonmouth moccasin will be unable to escape the droughts that threaten the Everglades.

Below left: The great egret was once hunted for its long, white, plumed feathers.



its wildlife in great danger.

The Everglades is, essentially, a drainage area. Northern rainfall slowly filters south, feeding and nourishing the region. Loss of water is threatening the survival of wildlife in this delicate ecosystem.

In 1947, Everglades National Park was established. Although the park covers only 2,020 square miles in the

southernmost Everglades, the park's management has become increasingly concerned about the survival of the entire region and its inhabitants. One of its aims is to protect the endangered species, which include the Florida panther, the manatee, the green sea turtle, the peregrine falcon, and the Cape Sable sparrow.

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The Everglades contains a variety of habitats, from marshy grasslands to pine forests and wide, shallow rivers that flow south to the ocean. It supports more than 300 species of bird, and is home to many other kinds of rare wildlife.

ORIGINS & FEATURES

When the last Ice Age began, the oceans started to recede and the area that is now southern Florida was formed. Today, this area is known as the Everglades.

The Everglades is characterized by prairies of tall sawgrass

that grow in swampy, shallow water. Sawgrass can grow up to 12 feet high. During the rainy season in summer, a river 50 miles wide and only 6 inches deep flows south through the tall sawgrass toward the sea.

MANGROVE SWAMPS

An area of mangrove swamp begins where the Everglades meet Florida Bay. This group of small islands surrounded by mangrove trees forms the ocean boundary of the Everglades and has a vital role in protecting the coast from

storms. These swamps harbor many types of marine organisms, including mullet, snapper, stone crabs, shrimp, and spiny lobsters, as well as many of the larger water birds, such as the brown pelican, roseate spoonbill,



Left: *The shy manatee feeds on plant life in shallow, coastal waters.*

Right: *The spectacular roseate spoonbill gets its name from its long, spatulate bill.*



HAMMOCKS

Hardwood hammocks are small islands found in the freshwater plants of the Everglades. They consist of hardwood tropical trees and smaller plants that grow about 10 feet above the water level and the rest of the terrain.

The wildlife that inhabits the hammocks and their surroundings includes the colorful Liguus tree snail, the weaver spider, and the barred owl, which comes out at night to hunt.

PINELANDS

Thirty types of native plants grow in the pine forest of the Everglades. Naturally occurring fires periodically rejuvenate the soil. White-tailed deer, opossum, raccoon, and the endangered Florida panther are all found here.

FRESHWATER SLOUGH

These areas of slow-moving, shallow rivers run through the interior of the Everglades and out into Florida Bay. These rivers act as a reservoir,

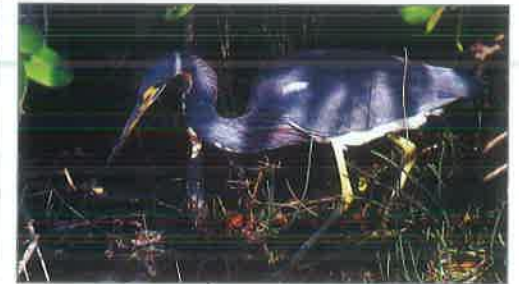
supplying water in the dry season. Alligators, otters, turtles, fish, marsh rabbits, herons, anhingas, egrets, snail kites, and purple

gallinules are some of the animals that frequent the sloughs, which run on a gradient so slight that the water often seems not to flow at all.



Above: *The tricolored heron stalks patiently through the undergrowth for its prey.*

Left: *The anhinga dries its wings after diving for fish.*



THE ALLIGATOR

The alligator is the best known of all the Everglades' wildlife. One of the region's great predators, it is also sometimes called the "Keeper of the Everglades" because of the important functions that it performs. When the water level falls in the dry season, the alligator locates dried-up water-holes, known as gator holes, and, using its powerful claws, digs down until it finds water. Other species also use the hole, and the area teems with wildlife that might otherwise perish under the drought conditions.

The alligator also keeps the narrow channels running through the swamps from getting clogged up. It dredges them with its snout and rips out vegetation with its claws.

During the breeding season from May to June, the female builds a large nest, about 3 to 4 feet high and 6 to 8 feet wide. The nests are also used by other animals because they are always built near water.

