# Field Guide

# The Sawgrass Prairie

## Overview

The Seminole Indians gave a name to the Everglades: ***Pa-hay-okee***. This name translates to "grassy waters." Later, the writer Marjorie Stoneman Douglass borrowed the Seminole's description in her famous book The Everglades: River of Grass. In many ways, the vast sawgrass prairies define the Everglades.

This marshy habitat is more than just water and sawgrass. It's actually a diverse and very dynamic place. During the summer rainy season, these habitats are filled with shallow, slow-flowing fresh water and they teem with fish, snails, crustaceans...all kinds of aquatic animals. During the winter dry season, however, these prairies can dry down completely. This causes the aquatic animals that live there to concentrate into deeper pools of remaining water...making them easy picking for wading birds and other predators!

## Plants

**Sawgrass–** don't be fooled, sawgrass is not actually a grass. It's actually a type of sedge. It does, however, have rows of sharp teeth... so at least that part of the name is accurate!

Sawgrass is the most dominant plant in the Everglades. Despite the tough name, deer browse on the tender bases of the plant, and red-wing black birds nibble on their nutritious seeds. Apple snails also like to lay their eggs just above the water on sawgrass stalks.

**Cattails–** these tall, water-loving plants are common throughout the US. Even though they are native, cattails can be invasive, taking over habitats that are disturbed or polluted.

Parts of the cattail plant, such as the tender heart, are edible. Native Americans also used the rhizomes to create flour.

**Bladderwort–** they look small and delicate but believe it or not, bladderworts are deadly…if you're a tiny bug at least.

these carniverous plants get their names from the clusters of air-filled bladders that hold the plants afloat in the marsh. These bladders, are actually small traps that can spring open and "swallow" tiny prey that might brush up against them.

**Swamp Lily–** it's nice to see something so beautiful that thrives in a harsh environment like this. Not only is it beautiful, but the flowers are deliciously fragrant.

Swamp lily leaves are a favorite food for caterpillars and grasshoppers, like the common lubber grasshopper.

# Animals

**Great Blue Heron–** the great blue heron deserves its name. In fact it's the largest heron species in the Americas. The heron prefers to eat fish, ambushing them in the water by spearing them with its sharp bill.

A white color morph variation of this bird is found only in South Florida and the Florida Keys.

**Mosquito fish–** the mosquito fish gets its name from its favorite food: mosquitoes…the aquatic mosquito larvae to be specific. That's good news for us!

This is one of the most common fresh water fish in the Everglades, and is a really important link in the food chain.

**Florida Apple Snail–** the Florida apple snail is another super important link in the food chain. Limpkins primarily eat them, and the Everglades snail kite only eats them. Even alligators enjoy them here and there!

The Florida apple snail is facing new competition. As many as 4 species of exotic apple snails are threatening to displace this native species.
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**Everglades Snail Kite–** As we just learned, the Everglades snail kite is a picky eater and only eats apple snails.

Biologists have worried about the effects of the introduction of larger, exotic apple snails on the Everglades snail kite population. The good news is, this raptor seems to like the exotic apple snails too.

# Cool Features

**Periphyton–** periphyton is not exactly an individual thing, like a plant. It's actually a complex community made up of species of algae, cyanobacteria, microbes and bits of organic matter. These things come together to form a spongy material which is food for tadpoles, fish and invertebrates.

In the Everglades, periphyton is crucial because it's the very base of the food chain!

**Solution Holes–** The foundation of the Everglades is limestone rock which is somewhat soft and soluble, eroding away over time.

In many parts of the Everglades, we find large pockets where the limestone has dissolved away. These deeper "solution holes" are usually some of the last places to hold water during the dry season.