

Don't Let Them Loose!

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor
March 2016

You can surrender exotic pets at Florida Fish and Wildlife amnesty events



Do you have an exotic pet that you're no longer able to care for? Don't release it in the Everglades! Instead consider surrendering it at one of Florida's Exotic Pet Amnesty Day events.

This Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission program pairs surrendered exotic reptiles, fish, birds, amphibians, mammals, and invertebrates with eligible adopters throughout the state.

In the ten years since the program began, nearly 3000 exotics have been given up by pet owners and placed into good homes, helping to keep these invasive species from being released into the wild.

After non-native population crises emerged in and around the Everglades -- a situation created by overwhelmed and irresponsible owners setting pets free -- FWC sought to counter the situation with a no-penalty/no-questions-asked alternative in order to help reduce the numbers of pythons, Nile monitors, and other exotic species in our wild habitats.

Six Exotic Pet Amnesty Day events are now held around the state each year in which non-natives are surrendered and placed with pre-approved families the same day.

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In 2011, a telephone hotline was established to accept animals outside the official events. Carli Segelson of FWC's Division of Habitat and Species Conservation says that 512 exotics were surrendered last year. Among that total were 181 turtles and tortoises, 103 snakes, 52 lizards, and 115 birds.

Surrendering is easy. Just use a carrier or container to transport your exotic animal to any scheduled amnesty event. Pet supplies and contact information can be shared with the new adoptive families. (Domestic pets -- dogs, cats, and rabbits -- aren't accepted in this program.)

Adopting is a bit more involved. You'll have to fill out and submit an online Adopter Information Form prior to an amnesty event. In addition, you'll be asked to complete an Animal Information Form, noting the species you'd like to adopt. Some species require FWC permits before adoption approval.

Only approved adopters will receive acceptance letters from FWC and will be notified of the next Amnesty Day. Adoptions start directly after surrenders have taken place; a random drawing establishes the adoption order. Amnesty Days are free public events, and the adoptions are free.

"Before adopting, make sure you understand the care and cost associated with owning that pet," recommends Segelson. "Many times exotics don't make great pets."

That's why teaching responsible pet ownership is another focus of these Amnesty gatherings. Families can learn about exotics and their care through educational displays, and can see creatures such as ball pythons, sugar gliders, green iguanas, parrots, tortoises, hedgehogs, and red-eared sliders. These are all non-native species -- animals in the wild that didn't historically occur in our state, most of which were introduced by humans.

According to FWC, there are more than 500 non-native animal species in natural areas of Florida; 130 of them are believed to be reproducing. Non-native species are a concern since they can expand their ranges, causing human health, economic, or environmental harm. It's against Florida state law to release a non-native species into the wild.

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Some animals get here unknowingly. Ballast water and boat hulls often carry in marine exotics; sometimes non-native pets escape from enclosures, ending up in natural areas.

Most introduced non-natives don't become established and invasive, but the Cuban tree frog is one that has. Its numbers spread throughout Florida after first being brought here as accidental stowaways in shipping materials in the early 1930s; then it became a rival and predator of tree frogs native to our state.

The best-known invasive exotic in Florida is the python. The ball python, a snake under four feet in length, is a non-native, but FWC reports that there are no reproducing populations. Not so with the larger and prolific Burmese python. These snakes are usually six to ten feet long, although the largest found in Everglades National Park was 16 feet and weighed more than 100 pounds.

This constrictor's range has spread throughout South Florida, and it feeds on native and non-native species. It's been known to eat endangered animals, such as the Key Largo woodrat, and has no natural predators. A 2014 article in *U.S. News & World Report* indicated that the Burmese was decimating the Everglades' populations of rabbits and raccoons, as well as eating alligators, deer, and wood storks.

Acquiring or selling Burmese pythons as pets is now prohibited in Florida. Hundreds of people have participated in the annual python round-up competition to reduce their populations. The Huffington Post reported that from 2000 to 2013, some 2050 pythons had been captured.

FWC upcoming Amnesty Day events: Saturday, March 12, 10:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m. at Zoo Miami; and Saturday May 14, 10:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m. at Osceola Heritage Park in Kissimmee. Contact PetAmnesty@myfwc.com, or the hotline at 888-483-4681.

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