

Python kill-athon

By FRANK CERABINO

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WEST PALM BEACH

Attention snake hunters, snowbirds who've grown tired of golf, and people who will try just about anything to win \$1,500.

The state of Florida will soon be sponsoring its first-ever Python Challenge, an open-to-the-public, monthlong Burmese python hunting contest in four of the state's wildlife areas:

A grand prize of \$1,500 will be awarded to the hunter who kills the most pythons, and another \$1,000 goes to the hunter who bags the longest snake. The prizes will be awarded in two divisions: the novices; and those who already have python hunting permits.

The hunt, sponsored by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, runs from Jan. 12 to Feb. 10. And its kickoff (step carefully?) event will feature a chef who specializes in exotic wildlife recipes.

"The FWC is encouraging the public to get involved in helping us remove Burmese pythons from the public lands in South Florida," announced Kristen Sommers, the Exotic Species Coordination Section head of the agency.

What can go wrong? After all, roaming around the swampy heart of Florida looking for 15-foot reptiles can't be as tricky as voting.

"Part of the goal of the Python Challenge is to educate the public to understand why non-native species like Burmese pythons should never be released into the wild," Sommers said in a prepared statement.

So now, the public is being summoned as a kind of state militia to go to battle with the progeny of their former pets.

Understandably, the state is taking some prudent precautions. No hunting license is required, but participants must pay a \$25 entry fee and complete a 40-minute online training course called REDDY, which very

loosely stands for Introduced Reptile Early Detection & Documentation.

The course is designed to help people recognize pythons and other non-native species from the critters they're not supposed to kill. It also has some good common-sense tips.

"A severed snake head might be able to bite for up to an hour purely by reflex," was a memorable one.

The contest rules, available on PythonChallenge.org, specify that it only counts if you kill pythons from the Everglades and Francis S. Taylor, Holey Land, Rotenberger and Big Cypress wildlife management areas.

The rules seem to take into account that if you're going to unleash the Florida public on a bloodthirsty quest for cash, you'd better assume the worst.

So it specifies that hunters will be disqualified if they present a dead python "originally possessed as a pet."

Also that snakes must be dead before brought to the contest's collection points.

"To be eligible for the longest Burmese python prize, the snake should be in no more than two pieces (e.g., the head removed from the body.)" This ought to cut down on cheaters who might claim that a bunch of snake parts from different animals were really part of some giant python. Like I said, you've got to assume the worst.

Hunters are encouraged to dispatch the snakes humanely by severing their heads with a machete or shooting them in the brain. And zany sadistic YouTube videos or Facebook postings from the hunt will not be tolerated.

"You will be disqualified for posting inhumane photos or videos or for posting photos or videos of illegal activities (e.g. shooting from levees) on social media," the rules state.

Yes, we're keeping this one classy.

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