

### **Threat of Pythons**

Fox News turned its national TV cameras on Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge in March when the Florida refuge became the state's northernmost site to offer staff training on how to deal with a growing and terrifying invasives problem: how to stop the spread of Burmese pythons.

Over the past decade or so, the Asian constrictors, which can grow to more than 20 feet and nearly 200 pounds, have been let loose by pet owners and others, and have established a breeding population in the Everglades. That population is estimated at between 20,000 and 30,000. Top-of-the-food-chain predators, they pose a threat to virtually every Florida creature from endangered wood storks and key deer to adult alligators. The python is threatening national wildlife refuges to the south in the Florida Keys and north as far as Loxahatchee Refuge.

Animal traders imported some 100,000 of the colorful snakes between 1996 and 2006, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

A Python Patrol class, led by the Miami-Dade Fire Rescue Venom Response Team and senior refuge biologist Cindy Fury, taught Loxahatchee Refuge staff how to confirm suspected python sightings and capture the animals safely for study – alive, if possible. So far, there have been two unconfirmed sightings at Loxahatchee Refuge. Similar training was offered in January at Crocodile Lake National Wildlife Refuge on Key Largo, 110 miles to the south. At least nine sightings have since been confirmed on Key Largo. By January, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) had placed 59 python traps in and near Crocodile Lake Refuge.

Based on climate comparisons for the United States and the python's native habitat, USGS projected the Burmese python's potential for range expansion extends into the entire southern third of the U.S.