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FAU students learn to trap Burmese pythons

June 29, 2012 | By Scott Travis, Sun Sentinel

DAVIE – They came to Florida Atlantic University to learn about wading birds, but on Thursday, they got a lesson in slithering snakes.

About 17 environmental science students, most of whom are studying avian ecology, were trained on how to capture Burmese pythons, non-native snakes which have virtually wiped out raccoons, marsh rabbits and other mammals in the southern region of Everglades National Park.



PhD student Jennifer Chastant, 31, who had never handled a snake before, volunteered to go first.

"The trainers said [the snakes] were a little calm in the morning, so I decided I needed to take care of this now," she said. "It's a little scary. It's a wild animal, and you don't know what it's going to do."

Because many of the students trek through the Everglades for research, it's not unusual for them to encounter the non-venomous pythons, said Dale Gawlik, who heads FAU's environmental science program in Davie.

"We want students to be comfortable. We don't want them to panic and make bad decisions," he said. "And it's a chance to do something good for the Everglades. It's a chance to get some potentially dangerous, invasive species out of the ecosystem."

Trapped pythons are used for research and training, including Thursday's event, which was sponsored by the non-profit Nature Conservancy and several other agencies.

Jeffrey Fobb, who works for the venom response unit of Miami Dade Fire Rescue, used a few basic tools in his demonstration: a golf club-sized snake hook, a fabric bag and black adhesive tape. He showed the students how to pin the snake so it was startled and could be easily and gently grabbed.

"You don't want to give him the Kung Fu grip," he said. "You want to have your fingers right up next to his jaws. The more force you use, the more resistance you're going to get."

The students each were able to secure a snake into a bag without any bites, although doctorate student Jessica Klassen, 27, had a close call. As she removed her snake from a bag, the animal turned its head several times as if to strike her.

"It was exhilarating, but I just gave it some time to relax and calm down," she said. "It all worked out in the end."

Wildlife officials believe there are tens of thousands of Burmese pythons in South Florida, although exact numbers are unknown. More than 1,800 have been captured over the 12 years.

The python course is not open to the public. Anyone who wants to learn how to identify and report invasive reptiles are encouraged to take a free, online reptile detection and documentation class, available at ufwildlife.ifas.ufl.edu (select REDDY training).

If a python, Nile monitor, tegu lizard or other invasive exotic animal is seen, people are encouraged to

stay at a safe distance, take a photo, and report it to 1-888-IVE-GOT-1, online at <http://www.IveGot1.org>, or on the IveGot1 mobile apps for the iPhone and Android.

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