

The Everglades' Forgotten Fauna: Jailbirds

Kathie Klarreich

Kathie Klarreich reflects on her experience as a writing facilitator in South Florida prisons. Two South Florida prisons sit on the edge of the Everglades. Klarreich, founder of the prison writing organization Exchange for Change, examines her own relationship to, and that of, the endangered lives on both sides of the razor wire, and the haunting and fortunate experience of her crossing so frequently between them.

By the time I see the billboard “Cracker Barrel, 12 miles Ahead,” my breathing has slowed. I’ve exhaled 25 miles of Miami congestion and now it’s just fields and flowers plus a few housing developments on mini man-made lakes. The scenery stays the same but today the spot where a boat usually sits on a makeshift beach is empty. Gone, too, is its red, handwritten “For Sale” sign with a local 305 area code number. Perhaps the dinghy has finally set sail.

The turnpike ends a few miles farther, and signs for the Everglades begin, along with signs for two of Florida's correctional institutions. Prisons, in other words. Not that the prison signs are necessary. The double-decked razor wire fence is the first giveaway. It's also the last thing you see before a right-hand turn off SW 192nd Avenue to reach Everglades National Park.

In 2015, The National Audubon Society (NAS) recognized the Everglades as a Global Significant Bird Area. Forty-two globally significant birds, to be exact. Three-hundred and fifty species live in the park. This salt and fresh water wilderness received the NAS distinction because it contains a significant population of endangered or threatened species that live, breed, or migrate in this unique ecosystem. Bald eagles, arctic peregrine falcons, roseate terns, piping plovers—they use the Everglades like tourists use Best Westerns, a place to stop, rest, refuel.

Sailors like the snail kite don't know boundaries any more than they know they have been labeled "endangered," so the restrictions to enter the grounds of the Florida Department of Corrections (DOC) mean as little to them as their threatened status. The snail kite does its thing like any other bird. It just flies. Wherever. Whenever.

On occasion, the inmates who co-habitat with the snail kite or the Cape Sable seaside sparrow or the red-cockaded wood pecker may spot this winged wildlife flying overhead. Such sightings may be a prisoner's sole boasting right. Finding a silver lining behind bars can require an albatross-sized wing span.

Three high-security prisons border the Everglades: Dade Correctional Institution (DCI) for men and Homestead Correctional Institution (HCI) are housed on the same compound, the one on SW 192. They sit on the southeastern part of the 1.5 million acres that encompass the Everglades. Everglades Correctional Institution (ECI) for men is on the northern border. It's just off highway 41, which, as it snakes east, becomes Calle Ocho, best known for Cuban exiles, *Carnaval*, and cortaditos.

Shark Valley is further west from the ECI turnoff. It's a tourist attraction of sorts, after the Buffalo Everglades Trading Post and Airboat Rides. Here, bicycles and buses allow close proximity to the reptiles. I took my son there when he was eight. He liked the idea of popping wheelies as he pedaled by the creatures. It was spring and there were more baby critters than we could count; we stopped after 100, and we were only halfway through the 15-mile loop.

Another time, when I was driving with my mother, an alligator blocked the road. For some reason, my mother took the apple she was eating and pitched it at the gator. It didn't blink.

Parallel to Calle Ocho but further north is Interstate 75. It connects the lower east and west coast of Florida. A stretch of it is called "Alligator Alley," a name that needs no explanation. A while back an alligator, miles from the Everglades, jumped out of a lake and consumed a 47-year old woman who had been walking her dog. Some alligators don't play.

The United States National Park Service presides over the country's 58 national parks. Three are in Florida, but the Everglades is unique—it's the largest subtropical wilderness in the country. Florida's DOC oversees 56 state prisons, plus seven that are privately run. I organize and facilitate writing workshops in two that border the Everglades. Combined, those prisons house nearly 3,000 people.

Getting locked up isn't difficult if you've committed a crime, or if you're black. Otherwise, getting inside prison is a bit more complicated. No easy flyover here. Most days, the routine is the same: I present my license to a security officer in the control room, punch in my PIN, receive a visitor's badge and then pass through the first set of steel doors to an enclosed, tightly hermetic room that suffers from a dearth of fresh air and too much air-conditioning. Another officer asks me if I am in possession of narcotics, contraband, a cell phone, money over \$60, electronics, weapons or firearms. I answer *no, no, no, no, no, no, and no*, which everyone does, of course, but that hasn't stopped any of these things from making their way inside. My own students estimate that 70 percent of those with whom they are locked up have cell phones. I don't want to know if that's true or not.

Next, I pass through another set of doors into an equally airtight, frigid room where I'm given a body alarm, which is required but not always available. When it is, I clip it to my clothes and pass through another set of doors. They click open and clang close and then it's all moist marsh air, weighted with humidity. No sunscreen or sexy strapless here, just baggy clothes under which sweat immediately starts to drip. Mosquitoes buzz. Heat penetrates. More mosquitoes. More heat.

Instinctively, I look up at the sky, the same sky I just left on the other side of the gate, but it's South Florida, after all; weather is as fickle as a shooting star. Sun can turn to rain in minutes. If I'm lucky, I might glimpse a bird or a formation but most of the time it's just sun. Relentless sun.

I approach my classroom the same way a Key Largo cotton mouse moves across an open field—wary but determined. I'm never sure what's gone on before I arrive or what's lurking; problems in prison come in many forms, and not necessarily from those clothed in blues.

Save for their standard uniform—blue pants with a white stripe for men, pants or a smock-like dresses for women, state-approved shoes, and DOC name tags—my students resemble those in other places I've taught. Cosmopolitan. Alphas and omegas. Old and young, black and white, Hispanic and European. I have a set schedule for the hours I am supposed to teach but I'm subject to my environment. Not just the atmospheric one that impacts the Everglades—the compound closes when there's lightning—but all the other ones that are out of my control. Many times I've arrived only to discover that the compound is on lockdown. Once because an inmate took flight. Several times it was because there was a fight that broke out over a pecking order. Or a medical emergency at the hand of an inmate or, just as easily, an officer, who used to be called a “guard.” On occasion it's the officer who is injured. I don't pretend to know anything that happens during the 140-plus hours of the week I am not there.

There's a “hunt or be hunted” in the Everglades that no amount of protected status will change. Sometimes the weak survive, but more often they don't. It's not so different in prison.

The panther is at the top of the local food chain of the wildlife found in the Everglades. As far as I know, there's never been a panther sighting on a prison compound, though they can leap 15 feet vertically and 45 feet horizontally. The rape of land that threatens the local ecology has reduced the panther population to just over 100. To survive, a male panther needs an average of 200 square miles.

The average size for a two-man prison cell is 8 x 10 feet. There is no air-conditioning in prison dorms—South Florida, remember.

The type of crime often determines the type of dorm. In addition to the two-person cell, there is the open bay dorm. A bit like Shark Valley after mating season—dozens of people to your right and left, up or down, depending on your bunk assignment.

Everyone in prison has a job. The male institutions have a program that allows certain inmates to work outside the compound. The woman's prison has a dog-training program. The job that everyone seems to hate is kitchen duty. For a prison with more than 1,500 inmates, that's a lot of meals. When trucks come on the compound to deliver food, or fuel—lockdown. I have had class cancelled for that reason, too.

Tuesday is chicken day. Everyone loves Tuesdays. The guys who bring the chicken in, though, they hate it. No matter how many extra pieces they prepare, they inevitably run out. "You can't imagine where they hide those breasts," a food supplier told me recently.

Panthers are carnivores. They used to feed off deer, but urbanization has cut down that population too. Today, a panther has to kill and eat about 10 raccoons to equal the food value of one deer. To maintain their health and fitness, adult panthers need to consume the equivalent of about one deer or hog per week. Females with kittens may need twice this amount.

A pair of endangered wood storks needs 440 pounds of fish during a single breeding season to survive. Who counts these things? I've often wondered.

Count is big in prison. Happens five, six times a day. Inmates must wear their identification badges at all times. To the DOC, they are just numbers. In my class, they are just students. But sometimes even getting to class is a challenge. The guys in both camps where I teach have to pass through an extra gate to get to the education building. An officer having a bad day may make that crossing difficult. Or impossible.

My students are nothing if not survivors. They've created techniques to take care of themselves but mostly they crouch to stay below the radar. Literally. Camouflage. Survival requires retreat. Prey comes in many forms.

I know all this but still I push my students to forget about their outside environment for the two hours I have them in class. I push them to expose emotions that live beneath the surface. Or have been buried for years. I also push them to write about what they know. One student rescued a palm warbler impaled on the razor wire and wrote about the experience of holding freedom, just for an instant. Another wrote a story about a spider and a cockroach, dorm wildlife he knows all too well. The story ends with the spider and cockroach escaping their cell by turning into birds and flying away.

There's a story about geese that I use in class as a writing prompt. As each bird flaps its wings, it creates an uplift for the bird immediately following. By flying in a V formation, the flock can fly at least 71 percent farther than if each bird flew on its own.

When a goose falls out of formation, it feels the drag and resistance of trying to go it alone, so it quickly gets back into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird in front of it. Geese honk from behind to encourage those up front to maintain their speed. And when a goose gets sick—or is wounded by gunshots—and falls out of formation, two other geese fall out with that goose and follow it down to lend help and protection. They stay with the fallen goose until it is able to fly or until it dies. Only then do they launch out on their own, or with another formation to catch up with their group.

If only we all showed the same solidarity as geese.

Inmates by definition aren't allowed to flap their wings. But some who come in damaged want to learn how to fly again, want to soar in a new direction. They know that the outside world isn't all that welcoming. It, like the Everglades, could use a bit of restoration.

My exit after class mirrors my arrival. I hand in my body alarm and identification card, punch in my PIN, and walk through the two sets of heavy steel doors. When I hear the final clang behind me, I take a moment to look up at the sky and give thanks. Last week I saw a flock of geese flying south. True story.

I start my drive north with the windows open, mindful of the freshness. The heat dissipates with the distance. Late in the day, the canals reflect the sun, melting pinks and oranges. The water along the mini lakes ripples that light. I drive in silence, recalling the conversations and the stories, wanting to remember them without feeling the restriction of their confinement. I can't. They are inseparable.

I drive past the fields and the flowers, the housing developments, the pineapple plantations. The boat I thought had set sail is back again. Only now, the "For Sale" sign is missing. For some, there's no escape.

Kathie Klarreich is founder and Executive Director of Exchange for Change, a nonprofit organization that teaches a broad range of writing classes in South Florida prisons. E4C also runs written, anonymous letter-writing exchanges between its incarcerated students and students in local academic institutions. Her current work was influenced by her 30-year freelance journalism career, half of which was spent in Haiti. She has reported for print (TIME, New York Times, Christian Science Monitor), radio (NPR) and television (NBC, ABC). She authored *Madame Dread: A Tale of Love, Vodou and Civil Strife in Haiti* and is also published in two anthologies, as well as numerous magazines and newspapers. In 2010, following Haiti's earthquake, she was awarded a Knight International Journalism Fellowship to train Haitian journalists in investigative reporting. She is also a writing coach for the nonprofit Images and Voices of Hope, which advocates for restorative narratives that amplify the voice of those often ignored in mainstream media.