

Bones Wrapped in *Lygodium microphyllum* Rachis Suggest a Potential Problem for Wildlife

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A very interesting and slightly grisly discovery was made while conducting vegetation surveys for my graduate research project. My project compares the ant diversity on tree islands with and without *Lygodium microphyllum* and is taking place in the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge. On 1 March 2002, we were sampling vegetation on island L5 (N 26° 35.172, W 80° 20.357), which has a heavy *Lygodium* infestation, when we discovered a partial skeleton wrapped in *Lygodium* rachis. The ball of rachis and bones was located on the southern edge of the island and appeared to include a major joint, such as a ball and socket joint, of a mammal. We cut the ball of bones and rachis out of the surrounding rachis and brought it back to the office to take pictures and to identify the animal. The entire ball is approximately 38cm long and 18cm wide.

Dr. Jon Moore, a professor of Biology at Florida Atlantic University in Jupiter, Florida, tentatively identified the bones as the humerus, ulna, radius, and some carpal bones of an adult white-tailed deer. He also noted that the bones were broken apart and had small tooth marks on them, suggesting that they were scavenged after death.

Although we will never know exactly what happened to this deer, we have heard several theories from various biologists and would like to comment on these theories and present some of our own. The bones are tightly rolled up in the rachis, which suggests that the animal was caught in the rachis, not that the rachis grew around the

bones after death. We believe the deer became entangled in the rachis and either rolled itself up in its struggle to get free, or was rolled up in the rachis by a predator. One person theorized that an alligator caught the deer and went into a death roll, which is a possibility considering the location of the bones at the edge of the island and within grasp of an alligator. The shoulder and leg of the animal were probably left behind because they were thoroughly entangled in the *Lygodium* and were later scavenged by an animal more adept at pulling the bones from the *Lygodium*. The tooth marks noted by Dr. Moore are small, probably belonging to a raccoon or similar sized scavenger.

According to our theories on how these white-tailed deer bones became entangled, the presence of heavy *Lygo-*



dium infestations may be a hazard to wildlife. Thick layers of *Lygodium* forming "curtains" and "mats" in typically open vegetation impede the movement of people and most certainly of wildlife as well. Our discovery of white-tailed deer bones encircled by *Lygodium* suggests that the climbing vine played a role in the death of the animal, and that it is a threat to wildlife.

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Hope to see you there!