



Section 5: Fort Meade Recreational Park

For centuries, people have crossed Peace River at Fort Meade. Today, U.S. Highway 98 bridges the river, and hickory trees grow on the banks. As Missy passes under the bridge, a nut falls near her. When it rises to the surface, she bats it down. It pops up again as they float together.

At the boat ramp, three men are fishing. One rests the end of his fishing pole on the ground. A bream dangles at the end of his line. "So far, only stumpknockers — and too small to keep," he says.

He works the hook free and tosses the fish. It lands in the water not far from Missy. The fish is the right size for her. She dives and catches it in her

teeth. She drags it up on the bank beneath a tangle of twigs. She tears it into chunks as she eats it.

Another man catches a fish and the pole bends. He reels it in. The fish sways at the end of his line. "Look here — a walking catfish."

A third man says, "You're kidding. I didn't think they'd gotten this far north." He sips coffee from a Styrofoam cup with a plastic cover.

The man with the catfish says, "I've been catching them for years. I remember back in the 1960s when they first got loose. It was from a fish farm or truck north of Miami."

"I hear they'll eat anything." The third man sips his coffee again.

"Sure enough. And they can live in the muddiest water. And they'll eat everything in a puddle and then walk to the next one," the first man explains.

The man slips off the plastic cover, drains the last of the coffee and then fits the top on again. He walks up the ramp, tosses it into a trash can and then returns. "You gonna let him go?"

"No way — tastes just like a regular old Florida catfish — maybe better." Wearing a glove, he holds the fish. He slips the hook from its mouth. He tosses it into a bucket half full of water. Drops splash all around.

Missy swallows the last bit of fish. She dives into the river and moves south with the current.

EXOTICS AND INVASIVE EXOTICS

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If you were born in Florida, you are a "Florida native." Plants and animals can be natives, too, if they live here naturally. Plants and animals that grow naturally elsewhere but have been brought to Florida are called exotics. Often, these species have no predators or other environmental controls and they quickly multiply and take over. When an exotic competes with

native plants and animals for food, water, shelter and space, it is called an invasive species. Because of its tropical climate, Florida is a paradise for exotic species, such as the Brazilian pepper tree, melaleuca tree, air potato vine, pasture grass, hydrilla, water hyacinth, wild hog, iguana, European starling, house sparrow, walking catfish and fire ants.