



Section 6: Pioneer Park

Missy passes an oak tree that curves into the water. At first, it seems that a branch is moving. But it is a water moccasin! Quickly, Missy swims away.

She dives between the twigs of a submerged branch. The snake pushes through just behind her. She swims to the bottom and wiggles beneath a sunken log. She surprises a snapping turtle, hiding in the mud, waiting to catch a fish.

The turtle swims up.

It blocks the snake's path, and the snake turns away. It moves as easy as a ripple of water.

Later, Missy drifts beside a floating branch under the twin bridges of U.S. Highway 17 in Zolfo Springs.

They mark the north end of Pioneer Park. A nature trail leads from the pavilion to the boat ramp. Two women walk as fast as the current carries Missy.

One asks, "Have you been inside the Cracker Trail Museum?"

"Not yet," the other one says. "My husband and I walked around last evening when we arrived. We saw the blacksmith shop, post office and the Hart Cabin. I can't believe that it was built in 1879!"

"I know what you mean." She laughs.

"We also walked by the Hardee County Animal Refuge, but it

was closed. Have you been inside?"

"It's great. They have animals that are hard to see in the wild — a panther and a black bear."

"Do they have alligators?"

She laughs. "I see alligators all the time, but not in the refuge." She sweeps her arm from side to side. "Just look at the river."

The other woman sees and points at Missy.

"There's a little one!"

"You're right! And I don't know that I've ever seen one that small."

"That's the first one I've seen — and I'm happy it's a baby."

The women turn away from the river at the boat ramp. Two men unload canoes. A group of boys and their fathers stand near. They zip on life vests and hold paddles. Beside them are coolers, tents and other gear.

As Missy swims under the S.R. 64 bridge, she leaves the park.