



Section 11: Shell Creek

Peace River turns west where it meets Shell Creek. Upstream, the creek is dammed. It creates a reservoir for the City of Punta Gorda Water Treatment Plant. Downriver, Missy floats under the bridge of Interstate 75, where six lanes of traffic zoom across.

Homes and docks line the southern shore. Soon she passes some cement picnic tables near a historic hunting and fishing lodge. It was named Eagle's Nest Lodge because a pair of eagles nested in a nearby pine tree. A woman and a man sit at a table. Missy hears the woman say, "Many famous people used to fish here."

"What did they catch?" the man asks.

She says, "The harbor was full of fish — snook, redfish, mullet."

"Has sportfishing cleaned them out?" he asks.

"Maybe. Maybe commercial fishing. I don't know," she says.

"I heard that more than 1,000 people a day move to Florida. Maybe the harbor only has room for so many living things. There used to be more fish. Now, there are more people," he says.

Missy paddles away.

Section 12: Alligator Bay

Missy wiggles through the roots of the mangroves. She follows the shore, past condominiums and houses. She swims by Laishley Park, beneath the fishing pier and past the marina. She sees anhingas perched on the power lines that span the river, as evenly spaced as beads on a string.

On the south shore is Punta Gorda. The man who founded the town gave the waterfront as a gift to the people living there. Along the river is Gilchrist Park, named for a local resident who was governor of Florida from 1911 to 1913.

Missy crosses the harbor in the shadow of the U.S. Highway 41 bridges. She moves from one piling to another. Where the water is deep, she dives. She scoots away from a huge grouper.

When she is halfway across, she hears a spray of water. A dolphin comes out of the water to breathe. Another two follow. Then a brown pelican crashes beak-first into the water to catch a fish.

Finally she reaches the north shore. Charlotte Harbor is the oldest community in Charlotte County. Cattlemen and commercial fishermen lived there. Missy swims through pilings for docks, along the shore of Bayshore Live Oak Park and past the Charlotte County Historical Center.

Here, seawalls edge the bank. A brown palm frond shakes loose in the wind and falls on Missy. She swims beneath it for a while. Then she squirms between the fronds. Now it is her raft. In the distance, she can see the Port Charlotte Beach Complex and fishing pier. Canals and houses crowd around it. The current pushes Missy west where the shore is green. Maybe Missy has found a home in Alligator Bay.