



OTTERS

by Diane Herron,
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Otters are active mammals — eating, playing, running and swimming any time of day or night. They move from place to place but will return to a favorite spot. Sometimes, they make stick homes near ponds that they plan to return to, but these are only temporary or "vacation homes." Otters seem to be fun-loving and playing all the time, but they can bite and scratch when they need to defend themselves. In or out of the water, they eat fish, frogs, crayfish, turtles, muskrats and even baby alligators. Female otters give birth to one to five blind, furry babies, which will grow to be three or four feet.

Section 2: Flatford Swamp

The current slows as the river enters Flatford Swamp. Water spreads across the low-lying ground. Sand Slough meets six creeks here: Ogleby Creek, Boggy Creek, Coker Creek, Young's Creek, Long Creek and Maple Creek.

A man and a boy stand together where Myakka Road crosses Taylor Road. The water almost covers their knee-high rubber boots. Lu rests at one end of a log. Her dark brown fur matches the log's color. An ibis stands on the other end. Lu hears the people talking.

"Wow, Daddy. Was it ever like this? I mean, when you were a boy?"

"Yes, the river flooded, but the swamp was shady then, just full of trees!" the man says.

The boy asks, "What happened to them?"

"They died. You can see the trunks and stumps. Folks say too much water killed the trees. Some have fallen, too, like that log where the ibis just landed."

"How can water kill a tree?" The boy brushes a bug from his arm.

"A tree needs time when the land is dry. You know how you kids say you want to stay in the pool all day, but you want some time to dry out too?"

"Yeah. So why did the trees stay wet?" the boy asks.

Lu watches a damselfly.

"Ranchers around here used to run cattle. Then about 20 years ago, some planted crops, like tomatoes and watermelons. In the dry season, they watered them, and the water that the plants didn't use ran into the swamp. It was wet all the time, so the trees started dying."

The damselfly lands on the log near Lu.

The boy looks around. "But I see some trees."

"That's because some farmers are using a new system. It keeps water in the fields and out of the swamp."

The boy says, "That sounds good!"

The damselfly skims the water. A bass strikes it.

"I think it will help the swamp. Maybe the farmers too. It costs a lot in the beginning, but using it over and over will make watering the crops cheaper."

Lu watches a bluegill caught for a moment against the log.

The boy points to the log as Lu glides into the water. "Hey, Daddy, that log's moving."

Lu catches the fish and eats it as she moves away.



AGRICULTURE

by Curtis Porterfield, Polk County Natural Resources Division

Agriculture is growing food. In Florida, citrus trees are planted in groves, and fruits and vegetables are planted on farms. To make these plants grow well, farmers fertilize them. To make sure bugs don't eat them, farmers spray them with pesticides. When it rains, fertilizers and pesticides get washed into the surface water and ground water. One problem is that

fertilizers will make water plants and algae grow so well that they crowd out other living things. Another problem is that pesticides can hurt some animals. Many farms and groves move, store and use water to the advantage of the plants. This may reduce the supply of ground water and cause other problems.