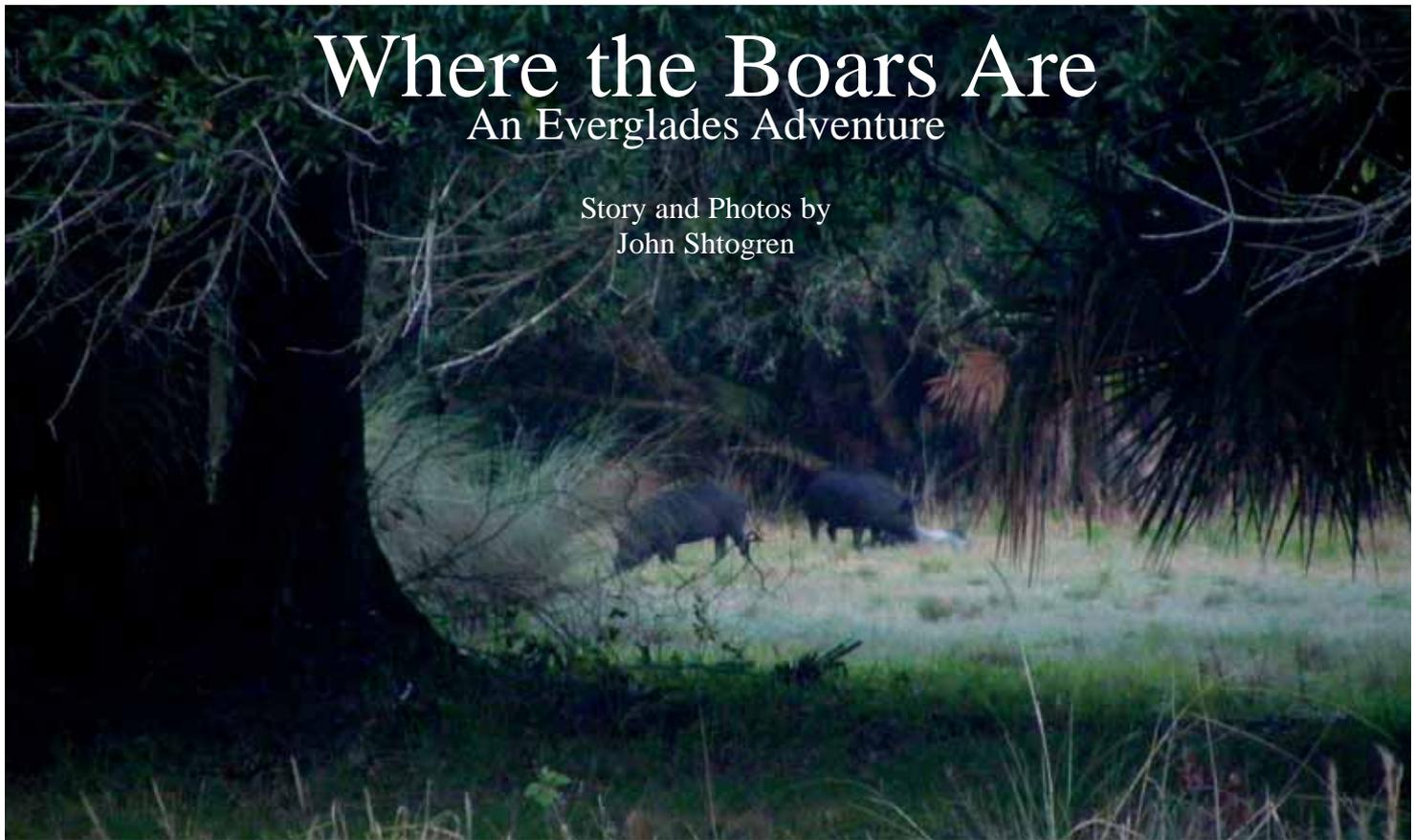


# Where the Boars Are

## An Everglades Adventure

Story and Photos by  
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**W**e waited behind a thin screen of brush at the edge of a sandy clearing just before first light. A rosy hue above the tree line signaled sunup would be soon. We could hear them deep in the palmetto scrub grunting and snapping their jaws and moving our way. I felt the breeze on my face, and my guide, Jesse Lee, whispered, “We’re good, won’t smell us, can’t see us.” I pointed the big pistol at the ground and squeezed the grips to test its laser sights. The red dot shone clear and bright. It was working; they were coming; I was ready.

They swept out of the brush like Mongol hordes coming across the steppes, 25 to 30 wild hogs moving toward us in a swirling black mass. When they were closing on 25 yards away, my ideal shooting range, the sun broke out over the tree line. I could now clearly see the leader of the pack backlit by the sun, a large black boar whose shoulder stood a full six inches above the pack. I frantically waved the pistol muzzle

at him trying to find the red dot of its laser sight. It was invisible, lost in the sunlight. At 20 yards they caught our scent and bolted, tearing off in all directions. In seconds it was silent and we were alone. A flock of white ibis sailed over the treeline in a loose v-formation calling “urnk, urnk, urnk” in passing.

Lee smiled and said what a good guide should say at such times: “Cool! Let’s go find some more.”

### **South Florida: Where the Boars Are**

South Florida is not what you might think after watching *CSI Miami*, or *Miami Vice* or, if you’re closer to my vintage, *Where the Boys Are*. As soon as you move inland from either coast, away from the beach hotels, high-rise condos and gated communities, it gets very wild very fast. It is a place of vast palmetto savannahs with islands of scrub brush, marshy bogs and wide drainage ditches. Sure, the orange groves are there, along with long fields of

sugarcane and garden vegetables, but the overall look is more primitive than cultivated. And it is wild—feral hogs, whitetail deer, Osceola turkeys, ducks, doves, bobcats and coyotes abound, and it is the home range of the almost-mythical Florida panther.

I came to south Florida in March for some sun and my favorite quarry, wild boar. Feral hogs are being found in more states every year, but Florida may well be the number one go-to place. It’s said that De Soto dropped off the first hogs on the Florida coast in 1539 so he’d have fresh meat when he returned on future voyages. Today, estimates put the hog population at close to one million, second only to Texas with its three million. However, Florida is less than one third the size of the Lone Star State so the hog density is slightly greater. Also, I’d been told that Florida hogs taste better than those from other places thanks to a diet which includes plenty of sugarcane and oranges, but I didn’t know that



A well-traveled boar path



The author with a fair-chase boar

for a fact.

Everglades Adventures is perhaps the largest, in terms of hunting space, and to my way of thinking, the best hunting operation in south Florida. Owner Capt. Mark Clemmons has exclusive hunting rights to 25,000 acres, that's 40 square miles, south of Lake Okeechobee, 60 miles equidistant from West Palm Beach and Fort Myers. There his clients pursue boar, deer, turkey, duck and dove. No matter what the quarry, all Everglades Adventures hunts are "fair chase"—no high fence, no secret release boxes where game pops up as if by magic, no chase dogs and no hunting over bait. All boar hunts are spot and stalk—go find them and get close enough to shoot.

Over the years I've tightened up my personal fair-chase rules, handicapping myself so the odds are better than 50-50 my quarry will *not* be taken. I've put away my tack-driving scope-sighted rifles, which are lethal out to 300 yards even in my hands, in favor of a muzzle loader, crossbow or handgun, all requiring field skills to get within close range. My boar pistol is a Colt Model 1911 which I had converted to .460 Rowland a year ago in honor of the model's centennial. It is more powerful than Dirty Harry's .44 magnum, but its muzzle brake

tames the recoil. The pistol's laser sights may seem at odds with fair-chase values, and they might be for younger, keen-sighted shooters. However, my aging eyes can no longer see the crisp edges of iron sights. The laser sights don't give me an unfair advantage; they just allow me to stay in the game.

### Here, Kitty, Kitty

We saw dozens more hogs during the rest of the morning, some singles but most in small groups, family sounders. With a rifle I could have taken my pick. But the breeze had stiffened and the hogs were spooky, on the move, and didn't allow us to stalk within pistol range.

We had started to drive back for lunch when the usually soft-spoken Lee shouted, "Look, look, on your right. Get your camera, get your camera!" Less than 100 yards away a Florida panther was stretched out and running full tilt across the savanna tailing a 150-pound boar, a scene right out of *National Geographic*. He swatted the boar on the run and rolled it over in a cloud of dust. The panther paused when he saw the truck, and the boar gained his feet and limped into the thick palmettos. After giving us a long imperial look, and

giving me time to snap a picture, the cat melted into the palmettos at the spot where we'd last seen the hog. There was no doubt in my mind about what he would be having for lunch.

Over our own lunch at the ranch house I learned what a rare experience I had just had. There are estimated to be only 150 Florida panthers in the entire state, and I had just seen one of the few. Before joining Everglades Adventures, Lee had spent nine years as a field agent for Florida Fish and Wildlife. In his many days and nights prowling the back country, he had spotted a number of panthers, but a sighting still kicks up his adrenalin.

### Shots in the Shadows

We went out again at 4 p.m. with three hours of shooting light left in the day. The morning's steady wind had dropped off to an occasional breeze. We headed for a new location, a five-acre island of thick cover next to an orange grove bordered by a drainage ditch that provided wallows for the hogs. Lee laid out a simple game plan. "The hogs hang out in the thicket in the heat and come out for windfall oranges at night. We'll go in after them." I asked him about snakes. "No copperheads here—too hot for

them.” His answer left a lot unsaid.

We circled the island looking for the best place to enter. We found well-worn hog paths going into the brush about every 30 yards. Lee used a small squeeze bottle of talcum powder to check the wind direction. Several times he stopped, tugged his ear, smiled and pointed into the brush. My hearing has gone the way of my 20/20 vision, but I was sure he knew what he was hearing.

Lee took the lead as we ducked our heads and entered the island. The brush was just tall enough for us to walk half-bent over. I followed with my pistol in hand but

pointed in a safe direction and tried not to look down for snakes. We were 30 yards inside the island when Lee’s closed fist shot up and I froze. He tugged at his ear, and this time I could hear leaves crunching and soft grunts. He reached back and slowly pulled me by the sleeve up alongside him. He raised a finger and slowly pointed at three dark shapes moving in the shadows 20 yards in front of us. He stabbed his finger at the center shape in a “That’s the one!” gesture.

The low branches and cane blocked the red dot from painting the target. Finally, the 200-pound boar eased forward to where his shoulder was exposed through

a six-inch opening in the brush, and the red dot was clear on his dark coat. I double-tapped the pistol and made two direct hits. Nothing. A feral hog has a two-inch shield of gristle covering its shoulders that makes it virtually bullet proof. The boar merely turned about and stood in place. But this time he exposed his prime target area, a spot behind the shoulder and low in the chest, and my next double tap ended the hunt.

Three hours later I was sitting on the deck over the marina at Doc Ford’s Rum Bar & Grill in Fort Myers Beach. Well-tanned, pretty people noticed my grin as they walked by my table, perhaps thinking it was related to the very large mojito close at hand. While they weren’t totally wrong, my happy face had more to do with the 100 pounds of fresh pork in the cooler in the back of my SUV and my wondering if it would taste of sugarcane and oranges.

For information on hunting opportunities in South Florida, check [www.huntsflorida.com](http://www.huntsflorida.com).

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**A rare sighting of a Florida panther**

**A sounder, a family group of feral hogs**

