

GREG THE PYTHON HUNTER

Episode 69

This is a story about a dog, however, it begins with a big problem in the Florida Everglades. The Everglades is an enormous swamp at the base of the US state of Florida. This swamp is home to many indigenous animals, including the Florida panther, the American alligator, the manatee, hundreds of species of birds and fish, along with dozens of other mammals and reptiles.

One reptile in particular is relatively new to the Everglades. It is the Burmese python. No one knows exactly how pythons came to live in the Everglades, but some believe that it is because python owners freed them in the swamp when they didn't want them at home anymore.

Pythons can be very big and they reproduce a lot. They grow up to 20 feet (6 meters) or more and each female can lay up to 100 eggs per year. The big problem with pythons is that in Florida, they don't have natural predators. Without predators to hunt the pythons, the number of snakes in the Everglades National Park has grown out of control.

The Everglades used to be full of the sounds of wild animals, but now, because of the pythons, they are strangely quiet. The raccoons, swamp rabbits, possums, and other small mammals have gone down a lot in number, or they have disappeared completely. Pythons hunt larger animals as well, like bobcats, alligators, and deer. It seems that no animal is safe.

To help protect the Everglades habitat and eliminate these invasive snakes, the state of Florida initiated the Python Challenge, an annual competition to see who can capture more pythons and win a prize.

One year, a Florida man named Walt decided to participate in the python hunt. The competition is difficult because the pythons camouflage with the environment, they can remain immobile during long periods of time, and they love hiding under the swamp's dense vegetation. During the time that Walt participated in the competition in the Everglades, there were more than 1,000 hunters, but they only captured 100 pythons. After walking through the suffocating, humid, muddy swamp for days on end in search of snakes, Walt thought that there had to be a better way to hunt pythons.

When Walt returned home after the competition, he remembered that his friend Pepe could train dogs to find anything that has a scent. Pepe had trained dogs to find turtle eggs, duck eggs, termites, bedbugs, sick plants, lost people, and practically

anything that has a scent. Although until that moment he hadn't tried to train a dog to find pythons, when Pepe heard about the problem, he was willing to give it a try.

Now Walt was hunting again, but this time to find a dog. Pepe looked in animal shelters, humanitarian societies, and dog rescue agencies for many weeks. There were a lot of dogs, of all sizes and temperaments. However, none of them had what he was looking for. He needed a dog full of energy, with a good sense of smell, and that wanted to look for things.

One Saturday, Pepe was in a local shelter. He looked at every dog in the shelter. He was about to leave when he turned and saw a brown and white mutt in a cage with a paper that simply said "Greg".

Greg left the cage and entered naturally into the world of hunting. He was a natural talent. He immediately understood that his job was to find things and he loved doing it. Greg spent time with Pepe learning specifically to find pythons with his sense of smell, or nose, and also to notify Walt when he found a snake. The method was pretty simple: Walt kept Greg on a leash and when Greg smelt a snake, he sat. Then Walt knew to check the nearby area. Greg was never in danger, Pepe and Walt made sure of that!

Walt and Pepe were anxious to try out Greg's new abilities to detect snakes. They made their first trip to the Everglades National Park to test him. Greg surprised everyone with his speed of finding pythons. He found 5 pythons on his first outing, many more than human hunters that only use sight!

One of the snakes Greg found was practically under the hunter's feet, hidden in the tall, thick swamp grass, completely undetectable to the human eye. Another snake that he found was a female that measured 15 feet, or 4.5 meters, and was with 33 eggs. Removing that snake and all her future babies saved innumerable animals in the Everglades.

Greg was a dog that returned many times to the shelter, but now he has a forever home near the Everglades and an incredibly important purpose doing a job that he loves. Greg's abilities have called the attention of other python hunters. They saw Greg and wanted their own hunting dogs. Greg has helped train other python hunting dogs. However, Greg is special for being the first python hunting dog. Walt, Pepe, and Greg want to save the Everglades and they will continue to hunt and train other hunting dogs until pythons are no longer a threat to the native animals of Everglades National Park and all of Florida.



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