

## A Taste of the Swamp

*By Leopoldo Llinas*

When my younger son was in 1st grade, Saturday mornings in our house followed a predictable rhythm: cereal bowls clinking, shoelaces tying, and the frantic search for a missing den shirt. It was Cub Scouts day, and the den had reluctantly agreed to go on a swamp walk with me in Big Cypress National Preserve. While other dads prepared for baseball games, I loaded a bucket of walking sticks into the back of the car and reminded my son, "Yes, you will get muddy. No, you may not complain."

By early morning, the Den gathered at the trailhead, fidgeting with excitement and a pinch of fear. Big Cypress during the wet season is its own kind of magic. The swamp rises into a shimmering world of clear, tea-colored water that reflects the sky like polished bronze. Bald cypress trees stand like ancient guardians: their trunks flaring at the base, their branches draped in delicate green needles.

"This is a slough slog," I told them. "Move slowly. Watch your footing. And don't grab anything underwater unless you know what it is."

The boys nodded solemnly, which lasted about thirty seconds. The moment their feet touched the water, the slough erupted in shrieks any time a hidden cypress knee grazed a shin or a mysterious swirl of water brushed an ankle.

As we waded deeper, the swamp transformed. Light filtered through the canopy in shifting columns. Fish darted between our legs. Dragonflies buzzed past us like shimmering blue sparks. A great egret watched us from a low branch, absolutely judging our technique. There the air grew cooler, and the undergrowth opened to reveal one of my favorite Everglades natives: the pond apple, *Annona glabra*, its wide, glossy leaves gleaming like polished jade.

The trees arched over the slough, their fruits dangling like small, lumpy green ornaments. Some had already fallen, bobbing gently among the cypress knees. To the untrained eye, pond apples might look delicious. To anyone who knows better, the fruit tells a different story.

"Are those mangos?" one scout asked.

"No," I replied. "Those are pond apples."

"So... can we eat them?"

I opened my mouth to deliver the responsible adult's automatic lecture on never eating anything in the wild unless the adult in charge says so.

A hand shot up. A splash. A triumphant shout:

“I got one!”

“Nick, wait—” I began.

Too late.

He took a massive bite, the kind of bite reserved for ice cream or freshly sliced watermelon.

There was a long, quiet moment as he processed the experience.

Then the gagging began.

He spit the fruit into the water, shook his head violently, and shouted, “WHY DOES THIS TASTE LIKE SWAMP SOCKS?”

His reaction sent the Scouts into hysterics.

I helped him rinse his mouth with his water bottle while the rest of the boys laughed. Nick wiped his tongue dramatically with the sleeve of his shirt.

“That,” I told them, “is exactly why pond apples are also called alligator apples. Because the only creature that seems to enjoy them is the one you definitely don’t want to upset.”

“Wait,” another student asked. “Alligators eat those things?”

“Absolutely,” I said. “Alligators swallow the whole fruit. They help disperse the seeds. And pond apples grow well in deep water, the perfect habitat for alligators. This entire ecosystem is full of partnerships like that.”

As the students murmured amazed at this new fact I continued.

“Historically, the fruit wasn’t just for wildlife. South Florida’s Indigenous peoples, including the Seminole and Miccosukee, used pond apples in a variety of ways. Some used the seeds for jewelry. Others boiled parts of the fruit for medicinal teas. They knew how to make use of the tree without expecting it to taste like a Publix mango.”

I stopped the group near another pond apple tree and invited them to look closely at its roots, half-submerged beneath the water.

“These roots,” I said, “have special adaptations to flooding. This allows the tree to breathe when most other plants would die from lack of oxygen. The trees are survivors. They are part of why Big Cypress can handle the extremes of this place. Their fruit may not be delicious to us” I nodded toward Nick, who nodded back, “but they are essential to the animals that depend on them.”

In the stillness, one boy whispered, "It's like everything here has a job."

"Yes," I said. "Even the things we don't always notice. Big Cypress and the Everglades are connected as they form a single, large ecosystem, with Big Cypress acting as a vital source of clean freshwater that flows south into the Everglades. Pond apples stabilize the soil, feed wildlife, and help keep these sloughs alive. Lose the trees, and you lose the creatures that depend on them. Lose those creatures, and the whole system shifts."

They stood quietly for a moment, letting this settle. These moments, when the swamp becomes more than mud and mosquitos, are the reason I live for.

We made our way back through the cypress forest, the water gradually shallowing as the tree trunks thinned and the light brightened. When we stepped back onto dry ground, shoes squelching, Nick approached me.

"Okay," he said. "I get it now. Everything's connected. But why does the pond apple taste like that?"

I laughed. "Because nature isn't designed for our taste buds. It's designed for survival."

He nodded, still unconvinced. "Next time, can we do a hike that involves blueberries or something?"

I smiled. "No promises. But I can promise you this: you will never forget your first pond apple."

The scouts groaned, laughed, and argued about whose idea it had been in the first place. But I watched them climb into their cars with a new kind of confidence, the kind you earn from stepping into the unknown, and tasting the swamp for yourself.