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Welcome to Florida: You will see many slimy, creepy critters. Don't freak out.

By LOIS K. SOLOMON SOUTH FLORIDA SUN SENTINEL | JAN 28, 2022 AT 10:10 AM



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Frogs in the toilet. Alligators in the swimming pool. Snakes in the kitchen. Lizards falling from trees. Palmetto bugs everywhere.

If you've lived in South Florida for a while, you may shrug off these critters who live among us. If you're a newcomer, you may react more dramatically, with a gasp, a shriek or a sprint for the closest exit.

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Some of these creatures were in Florida before we humans arrived, while others have been dropped off over the decades and managed to thrive. Either way, there's no avoiding them. Here's a guide to the slimy, buzzing and creepy neighbors you'll see at the beach, in your yard and in your house, when to get rid of them and when we must learn to coexist.

In the water

Sharks, jellyfish: There are sharks in the ocean and jellyfish on the beach. Jellyfish tend to wash ashore in seasonal waves; winter is [Portuguese man-of-war season](#). Although the stings are rarely dangerous, they can be extremely painful. Look for the purple flags that lifeguards post as a warning for sea pests.

Florida reports more shark bites than anywhere else in the world, but experts say there's no cause for alarm as the numbers haven't changed much over the years. Blacktip sharks are responsible for most of the bites, according to the 2021 International Shark Attack File.

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In South Florida, Miami-Dade had two unprovoked shark bites last year, while [Broward and Palm Beach each had one.](#)



We do love our sea turtles. Here, Kraken, a 192 pound female loggerhead sea turtle, is released back into the ocean in 2018. She was treated at Gumbo Limbo Nature Center's Sea Turtle Rehabilitation Facility in Boca Raton after she was struck by a boat propeller strike in 2017. (Carline Jean/South Florida Sun Sentinel)

Sea turtles: One ocean creature that South Floridians love and respect is the sea turtle, which [lays its eggs on our beaches.](#) The leatherback turtle can weigh as much as 1,000 pounds and survives almost entirely on jellyfish. Nesting season in South Florida runs from March 1 to Oct. 31, during which coastal buildings must shield or lower lights to prevent them from disorienting hatchlings. It's a thrill and privilege to watch one of these colossal turtles lay her eggs and lumber back into the ocean; several museums and parks departments offer summer walks on the beach to see these Instagrammable moments, including the [Museum of Discovery and Science in Fort Lauderdale.](#)



You won't find alligators at the beach. This one swims near Everglades Holiday Park. (Taimy Alvarez / South Florida Sun Sentinel)

Gators and crocs: You won't see Florida's famous alligators in the ocean. They make their homes in lakes, canals and other waterways, and can often be found in human spaces, such as a recent discovery in [a Central Florida man's garbage bin](#). Alligators are a prime attraction for tourists exploring Florida, with visitors feeling they haven't quite enjoyed the full experience if they haven't encountered the state's most famous reptile.

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Although Florida is home to an estimated 1.3 million alligators, it's important to steer clear. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission says [on its website](#): "Never feed an alligator and keep your distance if you see one." A good (and safe) place to see them is [Shark Valley](#), a section of Everglades National Park less than an hour and a half from Fort Lauderdale.

We also have crocodiles, which have a federal status of "threatened." The way to tell the difference between an alligator and a crocodile is the source of much discussion; mostly alligators are black with a broad round snout while crocs are grayish-green with a narrow snout, according to the [fish and wildlife commission](#). Alligators and crocodiles

manage to coexist in the Everglades; check out the crocs at the [Flamingo entrance](#) to Everglades National Park, where you can also see manatees and an assortment of ospreys and storks.

In the yard

Iguanas, blue crabs, scorpions: When you're outside, you're sure to see creatures that are mostly minding their own business, pollinating a tree or on the hunt for food.

Sometimes they get in our way. Mya Mull of Fort Lauderdale started walking home from work at the Hard Rock Casino a few years ago when an iguana, frozen from the cold weather, fell from a tree in front of her.

"I'm terrified of lizards," Mull said. "I screamed. Security thought I was being murdered."



Yes, iguanas do fall from trees in cold weather. (Joe Cavaretta/AP)

Green iguanas, which are not native to South Florida but arrived through the pet trade, [do fall from trees when the weather dips](#) into the 40s and below. They are not dead, just immobilized, and revive when the weather warms up.

Mull, a Florida native, fears iguanas, which are members of the lizard family, but loves to watch other reptiles, such as blue crabs, swarm out of a canal near her house. She recently

saw a scorpion come close to attacking her husband, who jumped up on a bench as the arachnid scampered away.

Such encounters are regular occurrences to anyone who walks a dog or hangs out on a patio. For the most part, Floridians should pay these creatures little heed, said William Kern, an associate professor in the University of Florida's entomology and nematology department.

"Ignore them," Kern said. "They are not toxic to humans."

Frogs and bufo toads: At least one toad is toxic to dogs: the bufo, or cane toad, which was originally brought to South Florida in the 1930s to help control sugar cane pests. Pets that bite the poisonous toads can end up dead within 15 minutes. Wash the pet's mouth out immediately with a hose and call the vet if you think there's been contact.

[RELATED: Welcome to Florida. Here's what you need to know about having a dog in the Sunshine State. »](#)

As for frogs, Kern said Florida's frogs are mostly harmless, and you'll recognize them by their peeping sound, which resembles crickets chirping.

Mosquitoes: You can't avoid them. Florida is home to more than 80 species; mosquito control districts spray regularly to prevent infestations. Some people buy electric zappers to kill them, but pest experts mostly recommend avoiding the outdoors at night, wearing repellent and getting rid of standing water on your property.

Spiders: Walking through a spider web among the trees or at your front door is a common Florida experience. There's a particular Florida spider, the brown widow, that bites when pressed against human skin, Kern said. The venom can be potent; doctors say the bites should be washed with soap and water and treated with antibiotic ointments.



Burmese pythons are unwelcome here. The state sponsors a 10-day hunting python challenge every year. (Joe Cavaretta / South Florida Sun Sentinel)

Snakes: Those with plants in the yard may notice the most common Florida snake, the Brahminy blindsnake, which eats termites and ants and is usually no bigger than a worm. It's unlikely you'll see a Burmese python or boa constrictor in your yard; they're more common in the Everglades, although they are making their way north. Pythons eat the natural area's fur-bearing animals, such as rabbits and opossums, and the state of Florida wants to get rid of them. There's an annual 10-day hunt; since 2000, [more than 13,000 pythons have been caught in Florida.](#)

[RELATED: Python hunt winner catches 41 snakes »](#)

Rats: With our abundance of water and fruit trees in South Florida, roof rats are plentiful, "the worst rodent pest in the state of Florida and most abundant," according to the University of Florida's agricultural extension service. They decimate fruit crops and make their homes in our attics and walls. Kern says they have pointed noses, long ears and tails that are longer than their bodies. There's not much you can do to protect your fruit, but make sure attics and other entries to your home are sealed.

Love bugs: Many who have driven to Disney World in the spring or late summer have had their cars pummeled by “love bugs,” black flies that can mate in the air and smash into car windshields or even boats, leaving their sticky, gooey remains to be cleaned off with great difficulty. Experts recommend vinegar and baking soda.

Bees: Those finding a beehive on their property often search the Internet and panic that Africanized honey bees, or “killer bees” that attack intruders, have invaded. This is incorrect, said Kimberly Collins, a registered beekeeper in Plantation. She said South Florida is home mostly to European honey bees, imported to the United States in the 17th century.

“I meet so many people who are mega-freaked out about bees,” said Collins, who removes hives and relocates them to her property and other safe places. “They may think they were bitten as a child, but it may actually have been a wasp that bit them.”

Bees, whose populations have been severely affected by pollution, set up hives in South Florida attics, cell phone towers, trees, sheds and home foundations. Collins recently removed a hive from under a golf cart seat in Davie.

If you see a hive, don’t call an exterminator; contact a [bee relocater such as Collins](#) or a rescue group such as the [Broward Beekeepers’ Association](#) that will find a new home for the threatened insects.



A Hollywood man eventually had to call a trapper after an iguana took up residence in his toilet. It happens. (CBS4)

In the house

Most of the creatures mentioned above can also make their way into your house. Everyone has a story about a slithering fat lizard, a swarm of flies (or bats) or a family of raccoons that made itself at home in an attic.

Nicole Karni of Hollywood has encountered a lizard in her toilet and another recently in her laundry room. She closed the vent to keep it out but it ended up getting fried in her dryer.

“The smell was awful,” Karni said. “It took a week to get rid of.”

Julie Karron remembers taking in her patio furniture at her home in Davie before a storm and being confronted by a swarm of bats.

“They like to hide in patio umbrellas,” she said. “So we have 20-foot ceilings and as soon as it got dark, multiple bats appeared in my living room. They were flying in circles and shrieking and banging into my walls.”

Rats are another common uninvited guest.

“We had a full family of seven baby rats coming from the backyard after a big rain,” said Sheila Siler of Parkland. “They would run, jump, go over the beds and make a big mess. All in one rainy afternoon. We were literally on the couches screaming and shaking. My two Chihuahuas came to the rescue and caught them all, one by one.”

The most important method for keeping these visitors out is to seal every crevice, crack or opening in the house, such as holes in the foundation and the spaces under doors to the outside, said Edward Baker, Broward and Palm Beach branch manager for Truly Nolen pest control.

He remembers moving to South Florida from New England 15 years ago. His wife flushed the toilet and 100 American cockroaches poured out.

American cockroaches, also called palmetto bugs, are among the most frequent interlopers to South Florida homes. They are fast runners and fly, inducing feelings of living in a horror film.

Baker said palmetto bugs live mostly outside the house in shrubs and trees. They are drawn to a home’s light, warmth and moisture. Besides sealing openings and buying bait products, Baker recommends cutting back excessive foliage around the building.



Cone head termites are a common problem throughout South Florida. (Taimy Alvarez / Sun Sentinel)

Termites are a much bigger problem. They can do a lot of damage as they chew through wood, plastic, drywall and foam; they're not too picky.

Some termites can be eliminated with a spot treatment, Baker said. If they're only in the furniture, he said the pieces can be removed from the house and treated in boxes. But pervasive infestations require tents on an entire house. Costs can range from \$900 to hundreds of thousands of dollars, depending on the size of the house and the extent of the scourge, he said.

As we figure out how to get rid of these little beasts who drive us crazy, some say we should approach them with humility, since they were here first.

"We are the ones that invaded their homes and destroy their habitats leaving them nowhere else to go, creating the problems we don't like," said Nicole Seneca, an educational consultant in Boca Raton who has seen her share of slimy varmints. "Stop cutting down trees, so birds can have homes and they'll take care of your pesky critter problems."

