

Frontier amid fairways: North Collier man photographs Old Florida wildlife in his pocket of forestland

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Bears, wild pigs and deer are some of the regular guests who frequent the home of Richard Paganes. Not very unusual for a log cabin in the woods. What's surprising is that his cabin is right here in Naples, with golf courses on both sides.

"It's a unique piece," Paganes says of his property, just east of Collier Boulevard, down a narrow gravel lane off Immokalee Road. "I've had people come out here who beforehand didn't even know there were bears in Florida."

His cabin is located on what you might call Naples' final frontier, over a hundred acres of wilderness that is still home to a variety of native Florida wildlife on the outskirts of the city. According to Paganes, there is a sort of "critter corridor" that runs through the forest just east of his cabin and crosses Immokalee Road, where an underpass has been built to grant the animals safe crossing.

On any given day there's a good chance of seeing critters prowling around in the clearing surrounding the cabin or bathing in the small pond there.

"The late afternoon's when most of the wildlife comes out, so I'll go and sit out in the hammock while the sun goes down, and that's when most of the critters will start roaming around," he said.

The cabin's two large, screened-in porches make for great creature-watching spots, especially when Paganes is swinging from the big hammock on the front porch. Dawn and dusk are usually the best times to keep an eye out for deer, bear and bobcat; in the daytime he's likely to see bands of wild turkeys burbling around the premises.

Even though his property is crawling with all sorts of critters, Paganes says they don't cause him grief or attempt to stage any raids on his food supply. And although he is a hunter, aside from one particularly aggressive pig that overstepped its bounds and so found itself in Pig Heaven, Paganes sticks to shooting with his camera alone. There is an unspoken pact between them.

"Long as they don't bother me, I won't bother them," he says.

Paganes, a real-estate broker who is a Michigan native, also owns a house in the more developed area of Naples, where he lives with his wife and son. But the cabin serves as a retreat from city life. He bought the five-acre property three years ago from a local attorney, taking advantage of a slumping housing market to procure the piece of land he'd had his eye on. Now he spends time there nearly every day.

Built back in 1990, the three-story, 1,800-square-foot cabin is constructed entirely of cedar logs, varnished a light brown. The upper stories rest on top of a stone base of walls cobbled together from rocks gathered on the property. There are two bedrooms and two bathrooms, distributed equally to upstairs and down. All the floorboards are made of oak.

Coming up the front steps and through the front porch takes you into a living room with leather sofas, a big stone fireplace, a vaulted ceiling rising more than 20 feet and high windows on all sides which provide a spacious view out to the surrounding clearing. And just as good a view inside.

"Sometimes you get the eerie feeling like you're being watched, it's so wide open in here. You never know what little eyes are out there looking in," Paganes said with a laugh.

The inside decor is like that of a true hunter's lodge. Smooth, sanded wood is all around. Stuffed animals hang from the walls, a coonskin cap sits on display, turkey feathers hang by the fireplace and there are old-fashioned bathtubs with claw feet in the bathrooms.

"I used to have a similar cabin up in Michigan, but it's fantastic to be in Florida and have this kind of an atmosphere," Paganes said. "It's so unusual that it's hard to believe it's in the middle of Naples."

Though sparsely furnished with authentic rustic appearance, the cabin is fitted with amenities that keep it from being pioneer. It has air conditioning, a kitchen with a fridge, stove, microwave and dishwasher, a reverse osmosis water system and other appliances that plant the cabin firmly in the modern era.

A primitive tranquility infuses Paganes' property, and it's hard to believe that just a couple miles in every direction are the housing developments and golf courses of an ever-expanding city. Who's to say what the fate of these last remnants of wilderness will be in the years to come? Paganes hopes the county will buy up the nearby land and preserve it. But already there are plans to build a paved road between Vanderbilt Beach Road and Immokalee Road less than a mile away through the trees.

"You can't stop progress," Paganes says, a bit ruefully. "The developments are creeping in, but as long as they keep the animal corridors and the buffer zones and the preserves I think this will always be a unique parcel of land.

"I hope so. It's my getaway."