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Invasive frogs more than an annoyance

Local resident euthanizes them to control their numbers

BY PALLAVI AGARWAL
Highlands Today

SEBRING — When Dean Gerber's son brought his girlfriend to visit his parents at their Spring Lake home, she got more than she bargained for from the welcome party.

A Cuban tree frog that happened to be close by jumped right on her, and the petrified girl screamed her lungs out.

That may have been a funny situation, but these invasive, exotic amphibians are nothing to laugh about, Gerber said.

Since he bought his house in the summer of 2008, Gerber has been battling with these larger-than-usual, bug-eyed tree frogs that harm the native ecosystem; not only compete for food with native tree frogs,

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UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA WILDLIFE ECOLOGY & CONSERVATION

Cuban tree frogs are an exotic, invasive species of tree frogs that can be a nuisance to homeowners and harm the native ecology. The adult Cuban tree frogs are larger than native varieties and have "bug eyes."

Frogs

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but also eat them; and can be a nuisance to homeowners.

"They are pretty destructive," he said. They like to hang out in the exterior light fixtures, Gerber said, and because of their urine and excrement the paint's been peeling and the metal is corroding.

At first he sprayed his house with a salt solution to drive the noisy critters away, but the rains would wash off the salt. Gerber then came across something on a University of Florida Wildlife Ecology & Conservation website.

For the last three months or so, he has been humanely euthanizing Cuban tree frogs and estimates he has euthanized 40 or so.

Gerber grew up in the country, loves plants and animals and is a "conservationist at heart," he emphasized.

"This is pretty much a last resort for me," he said.

The most humane way to euthanize Cuban tree frogs, UF advises, is to liberally apply benzocaine (20 per-

cent) to the back or belly of the frog after catching it.

"At your local drugstore, you can find a variety of products containing 20% benzocaine — first aid or burn sprays and toothache gels or liquids," they add.

After the frog becomes unconscious when the benzocaine takes effect, people are asked to put it in a plastic bag, seal the bag and put the bag into the freezer overnight.

"By the next day, you can be sure that the Cuban Tree frog will not wake up (which would be inhumane), and can dispose of the bag," the UF website adds.

Since secretions from these frogs can cause eye irritation, people are advised to use gloves before handling them. The wildlife extension service advises people to wash their hands immediately if they touch the frogs.

"Some folks experience a very strong skin reaction (rash) after touching Cuban tree frogs. Also, make sure you don't rub your eyes before washing your hands," the wildlife and conservation service says. "The secretions from the skin of

any frog or toad can cause eye irritation for some people, but this is especially true with the Cuban tree frog. These frogs are not known to be poisonous to small pets."



Zack Forsburg, an Archbold Biological Station staff member, knows firsthand how mucus secretion from a Cuban tree frog can do a number on the eyes.

Forsburg was collecting Cuban tree frogs from the station area and "obviously" didn't wash his hands well enough; he woke up in the middle of the night with swollen eyes.

"It was not fun," he said.

Native to Cuba, the Cayman Islands and the Bahamas, the Cuban tree frogs were accidentally brought to Florida in the 1920s, probably as hitchhikers in cargo containers on ships.

Since then their numbers have grown. Forsburg said they have done no "real

surveys" on their population numbers at Archold, but whatever surveys they have done showed the tree frogs preferred to hang out at the Archold station area rather than the much-drier scrub surrounding it.

"That's why they are a problem," he said. "They go into development."

Cuban tree frogs are common in urban areas, UF says, where they hang out near lights on the walls of houses and catch insects. "They often poop on walls and windows (leaving ugly stains), take over birdhouses, and lay eggs in fish ponds and bird baths." Sometimes they find their way into homes, hanging out in toilets and clogging sink drains.

"Cuban tree frogs grow very large, and are known to cause costly power outages by short-circuiting utility switches. Our native tree frogs are all much smaller, and aren't known to cause such utility problems," UF

says.

Highlands County Extension Service agent David Austin said he doesn't know if Cuban tree frog infestation is a problem in Highlands County.

"People ask about them," he said. "They are pushing out the local green tree frogs. They are more toxic — more to animals than humans."



Gerber does his due diligence to make sure he is nabbing the right kind of frog, usually from above the window where it rests or by nudging it out of its downspout hideout on a rain gutter.

The skin on a Cuban tree frog's head is fused to the top of the skull, he said.

If you move the skin around on the top of the frog's head with a fingertip, the skin won't move if it's a Cuban tree frog, he said.

These frogs are also much larger than their native counterparts. They may grow larger than 2.5 inches long.

According to UF, they usually have bumpy, warty skin; have large toe pads and "bug eyes"; are often beige or white; and have a wash of yellow color where the legs meet the body.

Forsburg thinks it's important to know the distinction between Cuban tree frogs and the native varieties so the wrong frogs are not being euthanized.

"To an untrained eye, they could be doing more harm than good," he said.