American Crocodile (*Crocodylus acutus*)

## Liguus Tree Snail (*Liguus fasciatus*)

Darkness envelops me as I step from the brightly lit marsh into a tree island, a pocket of hardwood hammock within the Everglades. I wait for my eyes to adjust, then begin scanning trees for arboreal snails. These terrestrial mollusks once glistened from nearly every smooth-barked tree in the tropical forests of Cuba, the Florida Keys, and southern mainland Florida, displaying a range of colors and patterns that tantalized scientists and amateur collectors. Competition was intense. Entire hammocks were burned to ensure that no other collection shared the sometimes hammock-specific shell designs. Between such over-collecting and the fact that nearly all South Florida's native hammocks have fallen prey to bulldozers, it's not so easy to find liguus tree snails anymore. Fortunately, a handful of concerned shell collectors and early staff at the then newly formed Everglades National Park had the foresight to translocate snails of various color forms into the park's protected hammocks. Today, more than fifty officially recognized patterns remain in the wild, continuing to earn this snail its nickname of living jewel.

## Eastern Six-lined Racerunner (*Aspidoscelis sexlineata sexlineata*)

We spot each other at the same time, a six-lined racerunner emerging from understory scrub and I. It glows turquoise against the dry oak leaves and I can't help but note that it would be obvious to birds, snakes, or other predators. It would stand out even more against the nearby sand of the scrub, coastal dunes, or other open habitats it prefers across the state. I sit still and the lizard accepts my presence, nosing leaves out of the way and flicking its tongue on its quest for insect fare. It darts farther forward, moving quickly and abruptly through the leaves like a pinball propelling between flappers. It pauses, staring intently at something in the shadows. Suddenly it flashes across the sand and I glimpse a second racerunner, one without blue cheeks, a female. As the pair races out of view, I understand the bright blue. It's the time of year when male racerunners are more concerned with impressing females than avoiding the notice of predators. Being the fastest lizards in Florida, perhaps they can afford to let their blue glow.

## Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia floridana*)

Long legs scratch at the ground, sending up a cloud of dust that all but masks the tiny puff of feathers creating this storm. An adult Burrowing Owl stands on either side of the pair's energetic chick. As I pull up to the curb, I hear a rasping hiss and the baby disappears. It's the smallest Burrowing Owl chick I've ever seen and so I turn off my engine to wait for another view. Cars zip up and down the residential road beside me. A couple emerges and walks their dog down the sidewalk not too far from the owls and their burrow. Houses surround these birds on all sides. I assume they'll become used to my parked car and allow the chick to emerge, but while one parent flies beyond the rope barricade that quarantines their home from the rest of the empty lot, the other stays firmly near the burrow and hisses each time the chick nears the entrance. They have learned to live among people, but they are still rightfully wary.

Like the caracara, Burrowing Owls are fundamentally animals of the dry prairie that became isolated in Florida when biological connections to the arid American southwest were lost. Initially restricted to prairie in the Kissimmee area of south-central Florida, Burrowing Owls expanded onto ranch and agricultural lands as fire suppression and human land conversion altered their natural habitat. Today, their nesting habitat includes airports, city parks, ball fields, and residential lots, places with diggable dry land and low vegetation. Once established, Florida Burrowing Owls tend to be full-time residents that continue raising their young in the same burrow year after year. The rock ridge below my own home isn't suitable for Burrowing Owls, but what I wouldn't give to have a family of Burrowing Owls as my neighbors; eating bugs in the day, rodents at night, and possibly allowing me the occasional glimpse of their tiny young.

## Big Cypress Fox Squirrel (*Sciurus niger avicennia*)

A small and furry squirrel huddles in the first rays of sun to hit the edge of Loop Road in the Big Cypress National Preserve. It stumbles awkwardly toward the bushes and disappears into the vegetation. It's my first glimpse of the state-threatened Big Cypress fox squirrel and I'm determined it be more than a fleeting view. I creep toward the bushes, squinting into a maze of branches and unyielding shadows. There'd be no way to see the squirrel even if it were mere inches away. I'm about to give up when a nearby cocoplum bush rustles. I watch the movement progress from one side, angling upward until a white nose and black face suddenly burst into view at the top. The squirrel stares at a large ripe cocoplum several inches below. Its tiny paw stretches toward the purple fruit. It's just out of reach and the squirrel strains, shifting its body forward until its entire being tumbles into view. Legs scramble, tail flicks, and the animal catches its balance. It sits a moment, seemingly testing its stability before once again stretching toward the fruit. This time it succeeds. It plucks its juicy prize, using its paws like a wood turning lathe to spin the fruit until every bit of pulp is eaten.

I watch the squirrel repeat its harvest, stumbles and all, several more times, but it's not until the squirrel scrambles into a nearby cypress tree where a much larger, sleeker fox squirrel awaits that I understand the animal's clumsiness. I'd been watching a baby learning to feed itself and, as I later learned, was still naive to humans.

Every other fox squirrel I've encountered in native habitat, both Big Cypress squirrels in southern Florida and the more widespread southern fox squirrel subspecies found in northern and central Florida, has been exceedingly wary. They've all been adults that have instantly bound out of view, including the young one's parent once it noticed me. To find adult fox squirrels tolerant of photography, I ended up visiting golf courses, pastures, and a beautiful, wildlife-friendly yard on the outskirts of Estero. These fox squirrels have become less wary of people as they've accommodated to life in the suburbs where they've learned to use golf courses and other park-like settings with trees and open understory as a replacement for forest homes lost to development and fire suppression. I'm impressed by their resourcefulness and grateful for the photographic opportunities, but I hope there'll also always be animals too wary to pause.