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Stalking the mock turtle

By Joe Roman and Brian Bowen

IT'S 5 am. We pull on muddy jeans, confront a horde of hungry insects, and pour a can of beans for breakfast. Then we paddle up a narrow channel, curtained with Spanish moss and poison ivy, and pull the traps set late the night before. If we're lucky, one of the nets contains a turtle, restless after a night of trying to escape the funnelled hoops. We slog it onto shore, heave it onto portable scales, and then flip it on its back to draw off a few drops of blood from the snakelike tail.

But fieldwork doesn't always resemble mud wrestling, even for wildlife biologists. One evening, our collection site is one of the finest Cajun restaurants in New Orleans, where a jacket and tie are the appropriate attire and the only vegetation is the 300-year-old live oak in the garden. Instead of setting nets for our sample, we make a reservation for two.

After serving the wine, our waiter arrives with a porcelain bowl filled with thick, dark broth. When he turns his back, we scoop a brown cube of meat from the turtle soup au sherry and drop it in a blazer pocket lined with plastic. Our newest genetic sample will join a freezerful of turtle purchased in restaurants, seafood markets, turtle farms, rendering plants, and even on the Internet. Later, back in the lab, we'll analyse its DNA to discover whether the meat came from legally harvested turtles or from endangered species protected by law. Our sampling may also uncover a sleight-of-hand we call the "mock turtle syndrome"—a practice that ...

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