

Rhesus macaques
spend most of the day
foraging or eating,
here on lemongrass

Rhesus macaques
arrived in Florida more
than 80 years ago – and
their presence still
divides opinion

Words by JOSEPH SIRIOTIS
Photos by NICHOLAS CONZONE

MONKEY AROUND



Males leave the troop at maturity and have an average lifespan of 20–30 years



Silver River has more than 8km of crystal-clear waters to paddle

SILVER SPRINGS State Park is a 1,895ha Florida gem, where spring-fed waters meander amid thick forests. It's a lush natural oasis that a host of wildlife calls home, from iconic species such as the Florida manatee and American alligator, to a plethora of birds, turtles and fish.

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But there's also another creature living wild here that you wouldn't expect to encounter in any forest in the USA, a species usually associated with the temples of Nepal or the forests of South East Asia. It's the rhesus macaque, which has thrived in Silver Springs for an astonishing 80 years. Depending on who you ask, these monkeys are either a wondrous addition to the park or an invasive primate species that simply shouldn't be there.

Many of the details surrounding why and how rhesus macaques came to be living in this corner of Florida are shrouded in mystery, to the point where they have almost

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become the stuff of folklore. One story goes that Ross Allen Island, where the animals first made landfall, was used as the set for a *Tarzan* film, with the monkeys introduced to enrich the background scenery. Another is that the animals were released on the island after being used for scientific testing.

In fact, responsibility for the macaques' arrival is generally assumed to lie in the hands of an ambitious entrepreneur and riverboat captain named Colonel Tooey, who introduced a small troop on to Ross Allen Island in the early 1930s. Tooey wanted the monkeys as an additional attraction for his popular riverboat cruises, but had failed to

realise that not only are rhesus macaques one of the most adaptable primates on the planet, surviving in a variety of habitats across a vast amount of territory, from Afghanistan to China, but they are also good swimmers. When the newcomers promptly took to the water and escaped, Tooey – as the story goes – simply acquired and released several more. The monkeys rapidly expanded into other areas of the park, carving out a rather nice life for themselves.

Just as people came to see these energetic primates on riverboats back in the 1930s, so tourists paddle in canoes and kayaks to seek them out today, travelling

from far and wide to enjoy both the scenery of Silver Springs and the peculiar sight of troops of macaques scampering through the treetops and making the occasional dive-bomb into the water. “They can swim quite well,” says Steven Johnson, professor of wildlife ecology at the University of Florida, who has been studying the monkeys for several years. “Though you'll notice they don't like being in the water – they'll get out in a hurry when crossing the river.”

NURTURED BY FLORIDA'S subtropical climate, Silver Springs provides a perfect home for the macaques. Clean, fresh water is plentiful thanks to the spring-fed rivers, and the forests are rich in food for these opportunistic omnivores, offering everything from plants to insects to small vertebrates. Mothers can comfortably rear their young

● **MACAQUES**



Females nurse babies for 12–14 months and give birth every 1–2 years



Rhesus macaques live in groups of 20 to 200 and are vivacious and highly active primates

with little human disturbance and, as social, troop-living creatures, they have plenty of support from their fellow females.

“There is definitely more interest in the area because of them being out there,” says local tour guide Joshua Swander. “If there are no monkeys, all you have is what is native to Florida. You have the different bird species, fish, turtles, manatees, alligators and river otters. You can go to any other spring and see those things.”

With monkeys swinging from the trees, this corner of Florida provides a micro-remnant of what North America might have looked like more than 20 million years ago, when prehistoric primates were present on the continent. The subtropical climate allowed native primates to flourish as far as Alaska, until plummeting temperatures, brought about by climate change, led to their demise.

IT’S STILL NOT KNOWN EXACTLY HOW many macaques inhabit the park. The last estimate from Johnson and colleagues, from a count eight years ago, put the population at 176 individuals across five troops. “Based on growth models, we would predict that by now, unless there has been management I’m not aware of, it’s probably closer to 400,” he says.

The monkeys’ potential to be troublesome is well understood. In the 1970s, another population of rhesus macaques was introduced to Florida, to two uninhabited islands in the Florida Keys – Key Lois and Raccoon Key. The idea was that they would breed and create a supply population for medical research. The result was catastrophic, with the primates feasting on and all but destroying the local red mangrove trees, dramatically increasing the islands’ risk of shoreline erosion. The monkeys were officially removed from the islands in 2000.

The macaques of Silver Springs have yet to commit such an ecological faux pas, yet there is one particular item on their menu that is worrying Johnson: their propensity to feast on birds’ eggs. Between April and July 2014, he and his colleagues conducted a study, selecting four locations where the macaques had been spotted at least twice. In each, they placed an artificial wicker nest that mimicked the typical abodes of several common shrub-

nesting birds. The nests were baited with two quail eggs, with a clay egg alongside them to capture teeth marks. “Based on our findings, the rhesus macaques are eating native birds’ eggs,” he says.

You only have to look at what happened on Desecheo Island off the west coast of Puerto Rico to understand the potential consequences of an acquired taste for eggs.



State Park entrance

“Macaques can swim quite well, though they’ll get out in a hurry”

A group of 57 macaques was introduced to Desecheo in 1966 as part of a study into the processes of adaptation. While introduced rodents and goats had already been causing a steady decline in the island’s nesting seabirds, particularly red and brown-footed boobies, which had once numbered thousands upon thousands, the macaques neatly finished the job, halting all reproduction on the island within just a few years. After three failed attempts, the island was finally cleared of monkeys (and black rats) by 2017.

Several controversial (lawful and unlawful) trapping and removal efforts have been put into action in Silver Springs over the decades, involving private trappers who then sold their quarry to the biomedical research industry, but were halted due to public backlash. The most recent effort, which lasted from 1998 to 2012, saw the removal of more than 800 rhesus macaques from Silver Springs and adjacent territory.

RHESUS MACAQUES DON’T JUST have the propensity to inflict damage on other wildlife, but on humans too. In Asia, despite crop and bin-raiding tendencies that lead some to view them as pests, the monkeys are revered as the embodiment of the Hindu god Hanuman. People are hesitant to act against them, even offering them food in their hangouts around temples and in urban areas, which has resulted in increased aggression.

“They’re teaching the monkeys to approach humans,” says tour guide Swander. “They know that if they go up to someone, they’ll get food. But then if the next person doesn’t give them food, they get upset and decide to attack. It hasn’t happened yet in Florida, but I think it’s only a matter of time.”

Indeed, any animal-human encounter can turn from friendly to feisty in a matter of seconds, particularly when food is

MACAQUES ●

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Florida fauna

Other species to see in Silver Springs



Florida manatee

Gentle giants that swim from the coast into Florida’s rivers in winter, for sanctuary in the warmer waters



Florida cooter turtle

Found in freshwater habitats from lakes to marshes, cooters often bask communally on logs or rocks



White ibis

Flocks of this elegant wader gather along the waterways. Their curved beaks are used to probe for food.



Any individual finding food will call out so the rest of the troop can join the feast



Cameras at the ready for macaque sightings on the Silver River



Merged sequence of a jumping rhesus macaque



Juveniles hit puberty at three to four years

“Any animal-human encounter can turn from friendly to feisty”

damage to the ecosystem, it’s likely that the monkeys will stay put for the foreseeable future. “I suspect that the state won’t make any decision to do anything, if ever, until something happens again or until they start causing problems,” says Johnson. “Then the squeaky wheel might get a little greasy.”

University of Florida’s Steven Johnson believes these rogue monkeys could be young males that have either been forced out of their troop or are starting out on their own. “There’s a social hierarchy. If you’re being precluded from breeding by a dominant male in the group, you take your chance and go out on your own to see what you can find,” he says. “They’re definitely spreading, one way or another.”

Females, on the other hand, remain with their natal group for their entire lives. It’s not unheard of for multiple generations of females of the same lineage to live together under the same tree canopy.

What the future might look like for Florida’s macaques is shrouded in as much mystery as the arrival of these strangers in the first place. But one thing is for sure: the rhesus macaques of Silver Springs are, for now at least, not going anywhere. Swinging through the trees and splashing into the river, they continue to serve as testament to the genius – or madness, depending on who you ask – of Colonel Tooley’s bold decision all those years ago. **W**

concerned. In light of the growing risk, the Florida Wildlife Commission passed a law in 2017 that prohibited feeding the macaques in Silver Springs. What is particularly worrisome about proximity to the animals here is that a number of them are known to carry Monkey B, a strain of herpes virus that is asymptomatic in its monkey host but can be dangerous to humans.

But these concerns may be overblown. “There have been no cases to say that the disease has been transmitted from wild animals to humans,” says James Wildman from the Animal Rights Foundation of Florida. “It’s fearmongering.”

With the risk of disease transmission deemed small and as yet no significant

WHETHER THE MONKEYS will disperse further afield is also a consideration. There have been various reports in recent years of ‘rogue’ monkeys travelling miles outside of their habitual range of Silver Springs. In 2012, news broke of the ‘mystery monkey of Tampa’, who managed to elude wildlife officials for the next three years. In 2020, *First Coast News* reported sightings of rhesus macaques from a long list of nearby towns, including St Johns and Jacksonville. Another was spotted in the town of Orange City in 2023, with more sightings reported in the areas of Clermont and Groveland in May 2024.