

Christmas in February

By Warren Swenson

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Here in south Louisiana
For as long as I can remember
We have celebrated Christmas
On the twenty-fifth of December
So, I was really quite surprised
When I learned recently
Some here celebrate Christmas
On the twenty-fifth of February

But it actually made sense
When they told me the reason
Why they chose to celebrate Christmas
So late in the season
And when you hear their story
I am sure you will agree
It really does make sense
And it's how it ought to be.

So to help us understand all this
We have a special guest
Who has graciously consented
To accept our request
To share how this all came about
With the rest of us.
So here is the venerable wise old nutria
Professor Nicapopolus.

Thank you for that gracious introduction
I am delighted to be here
Especially, to share a story
That I really love to share
But if you would please allow me
Before I do begin
I would like to introduce you
To several of my friends

Who were delegates of, what we called,
The First Creatures Congress.
Where the issue of the Christmas celebration
Was initially discussed.
First is the renowned brown pelican
Who we all know as Paulie
Who is otherwise affectionately known
As Pelican 33Z.

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How it is that he came by that name
Is a story recently
Published in his autobiography
Entitled, "Paulie's Very Long Journey"
Next to him is seated one of the rarest creatures
On the entire gulf coast
The white skinned alligator Pierrie
Otherwise known as The Bayou Ghost.

Then next to him are my good friends
Tonya and Tyronne
Two snapping alligator turtles
Who have hearts of gold and shells of stone.
And finally, of course
Someone everybody knows
The brightest red crawfish in the bayous
None other than Boudreaux.

Now all of us were delegates
At the First Creatures' Congress
Where we, along with many others,
Had gathered to discuss
If we felt it would be appropriate
to celebrate Christmas.
On February twenty-fifth
The vote was a unanimous YES

Now to understand our decision
You really need to know
Though we did decide this recently
This all started long ago
In the ageless ancient gardens
That have overgrown this land
Filed with bayous, swamps, and marshes
Here in South Louisiane.

Hidden here are natural treasures
In a pristine paradise
That is a haven, home, and refuge
To all kind of wildlife
Creatures live here by the thousands.
In the wetlands you can find
So many different creatures
Of so many different kinds.

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Some have skin as tough as leather
Some have feathers, some have fur
There are alligators, pelicans
Crawfish and nutria.
Here you'll find the snow-white egrets
When the flock lights on a tree
It looks like it's covered with snow
When it's eighty-eight degrees.

Here brown pelicans go fishing
By dive bombing and I've heard
They strike the water with more force
Then can any other bird.
The ibises, the blue herons
and the ospreys fill the sky
As do eagles who can spot
A marsh mouse from a mile high.

Honeybees live in the cypress trees
That grow almost everywhere
And the honey they store in their hives
Attracts the big black bears.
The crawfish we call mudbugs.
Everywhere you look you'll see
Where they have bored into the mud
Leaving these little mud chimneys

There are alligator snapping turtles
Whose shell is hard as stone
Their jaws are really powerful
Their bite can cut through bone
But the rarest of the creatures
And the one I like the most
Is the white skinned alligator
That we call the bayou ghost.

These are just to name a few
But you can rest assured
Here in Louisiana's wetlands
You will find there's many more.
They have all lived here together
In perfect harmony
And that's the way that it had been
For many centuries.

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Until there came a creature
Who started ravaging the land.
The most dangerous of predators
And we called these creatures man.
Their dredging through the marshes
Brought saltwater intrusion
That was destroying the marshes
Bringing chaos and confusion.

They had cut down all the cypress trees
Around lake Maurepas
Leaving the land more desolate
Then it had ever been before
But their reckless, thoughtless actions
Would soon prove to be their bane
As their destructive ways would cut paths
For powerful hurricanes.

Mother Nature became so upset
That she expressed her wrath
By driving her strong hurricanes
Right up those very paths.
With no marsh to break the storm surge
Or cypress swamps to break the wind
Man, who thought he was the victor
Had become his own victim.

Now, that's the part of our story
That begins with long ago
But to understand what happened next
It was a part you had to know.
Man had finally learned his lesson
And had come to understand
He was only the caretaker
Not the owner of the land.

Man, himself was but a student
Mother Nature was the teacher
He would have to answer to her
For his treatment of her creatures.
It was a matter so important
President Theodore Roosevelt
Decided he would have to
Address this matter himself.

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Being a man of action
And determined to leave his mark
On the conservation movement
He created National Parks.
Here the land would be protected
And the creatures could roam free.
This would become a part
Of his lasting legacy.

Now that was the beginning
But there was more work to be done
To help protect the creatures
Who were facing extinction.
And so it was that Congress
Decided to enact
Special laws that would protect them
Called "The Endangered Species Act".

They were determined that the future
Of these creatures be insured
And they as well as their habitats
Would be made safe and secure.
To enforce these regulations
They formed a government agency
That we know today as
The Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

Man had learned from Mother Nature
His responsibility
Of caring for her creatures
And he took it seriously.
I guess by now you are wondering
What does any of this
Have to do with celebrating Christmas
On February the twenty-fifth.

Well, all of this laid the foundation
For what would happen next
And the reason creatures here
Decided to celebrate Christmas
Not on the twenty-fifth of December
As do your families
But to celebrate it two month later
On the twenty-fifth of February.

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In nineteen-ninety-one at my home
In Bayou Sauvage
I saw this very incredible sight
That was really quite bizarre.
There were Black Hawk helicopters
That started flying by
Dropping Christmas trees into the marsh
Right out of the sky.

Then came the boats that started
Pushing them around
Until they set them in their place
And there they tied them down.
At first I was very perplexed
And totally confused
Then I realized that these Christmas trees
Would make a great refuge

For little fish and shrimp and crabs
And on the marsh bed down below
Trap silt and sand where the marsh grass
Could take root and start to grow.
Whether or not that was their purpose
At that time I was not sure
But I had no doubt these Christmas trees
Could help serve to restore

The marshes that many of us creatures
Called our home
These Christmas trees became
The greatest gift we'd ever known.
And so, every year from late February
Through the early part of March
The gift of Christmas trees arrives
Helping restore the marsh.

These Christmas trees, for us defined
The meaning of Christmas
The hope of home and life restored
Through a very special gift.
And that is why we choose to call
The First Creature's Congress
To discuss how, and why, and where,
And when we should celebrate Christmas.

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It was a deeply sincere discussion
And in no way a debate
When we unanimously decided
That we should celebrate
Christmas with the arrival
Of the Christmas trees
Which we now do every year
In the later part of February.

Now that you heard our story
And have heard the reason we
Decided to celebrate Christmas
In late February
When all the Christmas trees arrive
I am sure you will agree
It really does make sense
And it is how it ought to be.

Now you can travel around the world
And everywhere you will hear
That Christmas always comes
But it's only once a year.
But down here in the bayous
From us creatures you will hear
That Christmas always comes
In the bayous twice a year.

So, we, the delegates
Of the First Creatures Congress
Would like to invite you
To come celebrate with us
A Creatures Christmas with
The arrival of the Christmas trees
At our home in Bayou Sauvage
Every year in late February.