

Worm Grunting: Science and Folklore in the Sunshine State

Photography and Story by Eric Dusenbery

Worm Grunting. I had never heard of it. Then, I met Gary Revell and he introduced me to his livelihood and passion in the Apalachicola National Forest in northwest Florida. In the dawn's early light, with dew still blanketing the earth, Revell coaxes earthworms to the surface with his *stob* and *rooping iron* to be collected for his bait selling business.

The peaceful, early fall morning soon reverberated with a sound resembling a sort of giant-bullfrog/keening violin cross. I had never heard anything quite so, well, weird.



The day started at 5:30 a.m. at the home of Gary and Audrey Revell. They live within the forest and their property goes back several generations. The day ahead held the promise of learning about a unique folk art.

We drank coffee at the kitchen table with deer head trophies adorning a nearby wall. Naturally, the talk turned to hunting, fishing and football. The demand for the earthworms had slowed a bit due to the beginning of football season.

“There’s a lot of fishermen who love that football,” Gary said. “What people don’t like about this worming thing is getting out of bed in the morning. And, you’ve got to get out there early. Even though we’ve done this our whole life, it’s new to people. They say, ‘We thought you dug up worms.’ Once they see that iron and stob work, and the worms come up, it’s like magic to them.”

It was time to go, and I could hardly wait.

They picked up their supplies, which included the rooping iron (a 36 x 3 x .5-inch thick piece of iron), wooden stob, several empty one-gallon paint cans, water bottles and croaker sacks.

Gary scavenged through a box of various sized stobs — the wooden stake that is driven into the ground, then rubbed with the heavy rooping iron, causing vibrations that coax the earthworms to the surface. He tossed the stobs around looking for just the right one — made from cherry wood about a year ago. Others, made from black gum and persimmon, were tossed about until he finally located his favorite.

We loaded up a truck and it took about 45 minutes to reach the area of choice. It had been the scene of a prescribed burn conducted by the National Forest Service about two months earlier. This gave the Revells a somewhat unobstructed view to the ground where they would find the worms.

“See the way that grass glistens from our headlights?” Gary asked. “That dew is a good sign. The worms travel on that wet grass and pine needles.”

We parked the truck, slung the croaker sacks over our shoulders and started walking. Suddenly, we heard a distinctive groan in the distance. Another grunter.

“We can usually tell who’s in the woods by the way they roop,” Gary said. “This guy has a totally different rig than I do. He doesn’t use a heavy iron.”

He didn’t seem concerned that someone else might be in his spot — not like a secret fishing hole, I thought. I laughed to myself at the irony of the worm hunting/fishing analogy. The sound was far off, anyway.

Before daylight broke, Gary had selected his first location and set out his tools. I couldn’t see much, let alone a worm crawling along the ground. Kneeling, Gary began pounding the stob into the ground, then held the rooping iron above. Starting at about a 45-degree angle, he forced the iron across the stob in a deliberate, almost graceful stroke, calling worms forth from the earth.

In a couple of minutes, Audrey was picking up worms and putting them in her paint can.

“How can you see them?” I asked.

“They glisten,” Audrey said as she pointed at one that I could barely discern. “They’ll be easier to see in a few minutes, once the sun comes up.”

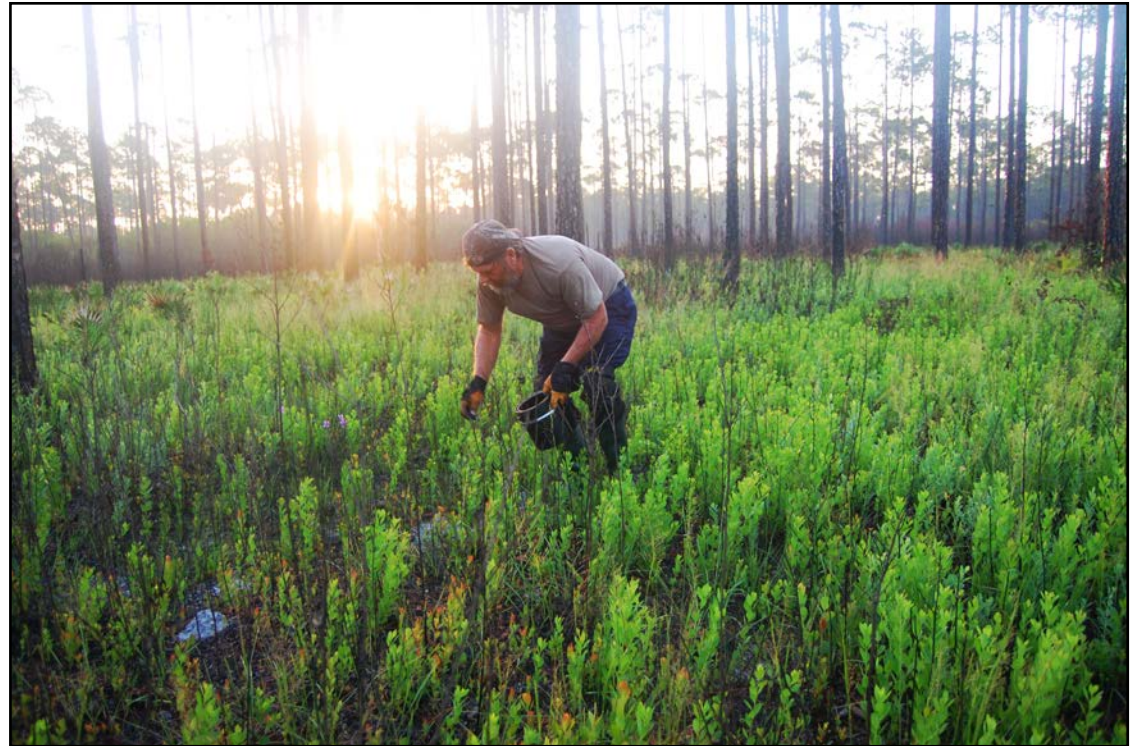
Gary decided this location wasn’t quite right, so we moved to a new spot.

“Just about everything in this forest loves the worms,” Gary said. “Turtles, frogs, snakes. Robins, too. They’ll hear that rooping iron, and they come down and eat the worms faster than we can pick them up.

“See those white spots on the ground? Those are worm castings,” he said. “When I see that, I know worms are around here. A lot of people don’t look for things like that. But, I do. It’s the best fertilizer you can use in a garden.”

We will learn more about that later.

Gary went to work again. Years of rubbing had smoothed away the center of the iron. He leaned in, putting his weight into it and began rooping. It was a feast for the senses. The sight, sound, and feel of worm grunting was bizarre. I couldn’t help thinking of Carole King singing, “I could feel the earth move under my feet.”





It was a strange, guttural, frog-like sound. At first, it was slow and deliberate. But, as he pounded the stob further into the round, Gary began a different rhythm; quicker and higher pitched.

I also noticed that Gary was grunting along.

“I’m known as the ‘Vocal Rooper’ around here,” he said. “I get into a rhythm. It’s just the way I do it.”

It was turning into a beautiful new day. The morning sun cast a soft orange glow through the pine trees. Small, purple flowers had begun to thrust their heads through the pine-needle floor.

Now, I could see the worms.

Gary worked at his technique while Audrey gathered them into her paint can. After a couple of minutes, Gary joined in the hunt.

We stalked an area of about 30 feet in circumference. They corralled 500 per can.

“We count them as we go,” Audrey said. “And, we count them back at the shop, too. Worm grunting is really is an art. There are some people who do it and they don’t really get any.”

Gary concurred.

“There was a fellow out here last week and he got about 500 worms. But, we came out with 10,000,” he said.

A scientist who conducted experiments with the Revells found that the worms come to the top as a predatory response. The vibrations mimic a mole, a vicious enemy of the earthworm that is prevalent in the forest. Indeed, the worms seemed to be running scared — inasmuch as worms can run.

It was muddy work, and hot. But, it wasn’t as bad as I had expected.

“You picked a good day. It’s tough during the summer months. We’ve had to wrap our heads to keep the mosquitoes away,” Gary said.

“Our family first started rooping for worms for fishing. When I was 8 years old, we used an ax with a splinter of wood. There were some fishing lodges around here and that provided us a market. It was like a gold mine after that. It lasted a while, but there’s not too many people doing this now.”

As appealing as the art of worm grunting is, it wears off. It is hard work. After two hours of grunting and grabbing 3,000 worms, it was time to head back.

The Revell homestead was a flurry of activity with barking dogs, cats darting about and some chickens picking and scratching at the dirt. The property seemed bigger than it was because the forest surrounded it. Two large vegetable gardens were strategically located to take best advantage of sun. And, it all benefits from the worm grunting.

Sawdust was shoveled into 5-gallon buckets and carried inside the bait shop.

“We get this sawdust from the forest,” Gary said, referring to three large piles that sat nearby. “It may go back 100 years. My granddaddy may have even helped cut down the tree that this sawdust was gathered from. He was in the logging industry, way back.”

The 3,000 worms were then distributed among the buckets. They would be sorted out later and put into baby blue bait containers stacked in the room, before being shipped to other bait dealers.

We stepped out to the vegetable garden next to the shop. An area of recently tilled soil awaited the planting of broccoli, cauliflower, peas and other winter vegetables.

“The worm burrows into the soil,” Gary said as he demonstrated with a worm between his fingers. “The worm squeezes down in that dirt and all that stuff in him comes out. We collect it and put that around a squash plant. Oh man, it’s good stuff. Can’t over fertilize it either.”

The excretions, called castings, are left in the buckets once the worms are removed and shipped out. The castings are composted into the garden. This circle of life has been helping farmers for many years.

“It’s better than those nitrogen-based chemicals,” Gary said.

At one time, as many as 300 worm grunters called the area home. It was so popular, community members from the closest town, Sopchoppy (population 425), organized a Worm Grunting Festival still held each April. Children are fascinated with the grunting, and the Revells love teaching them about their art and techniques.



“We’re passionate about what we do. We love teaching others about it,” Gary said. “We don’t make a bunch of money. But, what we get, we earn, that’s for sure. We’ve definitely toted some worms out of these woods.”

“There’s constant change in this. Nothing stays the same. The woods are constantly changing.”

###

Eric Dusenbery (B.A. Cinema & Photography, Southern Illinois University) is a documentary photographer, author and speaker through Cinderic Documentaries (www.cinderic.org). He utilizes the power of the still photograph for storytelling and frequently uses the traditions of the large format film camera. His photography has been widely exhibited and his work has appeared in numerous national publications. He is photographer / author of two books.