

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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The Mistnetters of the Swamps

By Ed Greenwood

*How and where and when did the **Forgotten Realms** start? What's at the heart of Ed Greenwood's creation, and how does the Grand Master of the Realms use his own world when he runs **D&D** adventures for the players in his campaign? "Forging the Forgotten Realms" is a weekly feature wherein Ed answers all those questions and more.*

Among the most "forgotten" areas in the Realms are its bogs, marshes, and river mouth flats. The big swamps make it onto maps and are obviously unpleasant places home to swarming insects, sucking quicksand, lots of odiferous mud, treacherous navigation, various lurking monsters, and swarms of stinging or bloodsucking insects that can drive folk mad. (Anyone who doubts the power of mere insects to cause pain and eventual derangement has only to remain in proximity to swarming blackflies in our real world.) Local lore suggests many outlaws, brigands, and desperate fugitives—from falsely accused outlanders to the disfigured and diseased—hide in swamps, and thieves and murderers conceal treasure there to be retrieved later. (Or they deposit the bodies of victims there, to decay undiscovered or be devoured by swamp denizens.)

Evil priests and wizards are said to experiment with lizardfolk and other swamp creatures, building small private armies—or at least bodyguards—of monsters coerced and altered by magic. Solid ground is scarce, and even places that may seem solid can actually be floating islands of tangled vegetation. Everything is damp and usually noisy, with silences being ominous signals that danger (usually in the form of monsters hunting stealthily) is drawing near.

In short, swamps are good places to stay well away from.

Yet swamps can also yield vital benefits. From wild rice (grain-yielding grasses harvested by rapping them with sticks, so their grains fall into the bottom of the harvesters' open skiffs) to frogs and eels and fish, swamps yield up food. It also provides resources for fertilizer (swamp muck) and even houses (reeds, clay suitable for baking into bricks, and all the materials needed for wattle-and-daub building).

Some folk venture daily into swamps to spear or "snatch-net" fish and frogs from boats. In rare places, open water allows them to employ dragnets, but in most swampland the underwater tangles, lily pad stalks, clumps of rushes, and underwater stumps are so numerous as to make nets impractical, and most fishing is by means of "deadpots." (These are smaller versions of lobster pots: wooden cages made with as little as possible in the way of corners that can get snagged on things, that are attached to floats by lines, and lowered into the muck primed with bait to lure in eels, crayfish, and fish.)

In the Heartlands of the Realms, there's an entire industry devoted to harvesting marsh fowl—not just the small birds that nest in the reeds and feed on the abundant swamp insects, but ducks, swans, geese, cranes, herons, and other large wading birds. Traditionally, this has involved many archers or slingers (sometimes a village-worth of small boys with sacks of stones), but nowadays, "mistnetting" is gaining popularity.

It requires fewer workers, and they needn't be skilled archers.

Mistnetting consists of laboriously stretching nets over large areas of swamp by night (when most birds are asleep or at least roosting) and awaiting the dawn mists. When it's light enough to see but the sun hasn't driven off the mists yet, the workers create commotions (by shouting and hurling stones and using bows or crude catapults to lob bags of small stones aloft, to break and shower areas with their cargo) to cause birds to fly up and get caught in the nets (still hidden in the mist).

The nets can then be dragged down to drown the birds, and the workers sometimes deliberately leave the nets underwater for a time. Doing so lures swamp creatures seeking to feed on the birds. When the workers retrieve their catch, they twist the nets as they hurriedly draw them up into open boats in an attempt to entrap the aquatic feeders.

Mistnetters always use open boats, with both paddles and long poles (often equipped with wooden-disk or old shield "feet" to make them more effective for propulsion), and they are always equipped with clubs and longpole dipnets (the aforementioned "snatchnets"). Some maintain rafts in the hearts of swamps, where they can wait through nights in relative comfort, or leave for birds to roost on, so they can readily net adult fowl and gather any eggs in nests easily.

This will seem brutal work to many modern real-world readers, and it's illegal in many places—but usually laws are passed because such methods are all too effective. To folk in the Realms, this is how they gain food to eat—and extra to sell elsewhere, to earn a livelihood.

Mistnetting and Exploration

In some cases, mistnetting yields much more. Certain mistnetters—notably those working the small marshes near Secomber, and the huge swamps in Tun and in eastern Cormyr—have begun to work with wizards and clerics who've perfected spells that either push water back to let air-breathing beings reach usually sunken locales, or that aerate the water or affect air-breathers, to allow them to breathe underwater.

Local mistnetters, skilled in swamp work and knowing "their" swamps better than outsiders, cut away underwater stalks to clear a working area, then use their nets to drag bundles of netting and cloth treated with huelardrimarr (an alchemical concoction devised by elves in Hillsfar in the early 1300s DR, whose making is now known to many wizards) through particular swamp areas. When this "Clearwater," as it's become known in Common, is introduced into murky water, it temporarily (for a handful of hours, the time of effectiveness varying with how "bad" the water is beforehand) causes all suspended particles in the water to clump together and fall to the bottom, leaving the water clear enough to see through. If a light source is introduced, or sunlight is strong, navigation below the water surface, as well as handling items down there, becomes relatively easy—for a short time.

In this manner, sunken treasures have been found, drowned ruins located and explored, and underwater dungeons, Underdark entrances, and back door tunnels (linking with city sewers or castle cess-outflows) have all been accessed. Sometimes this is mundane "fix a choked sewer or water intake, or make a choked boat-channel navigable again" work, but increasingly clearwater has made possible exciting forays against underwater foes, or the reaching of long-lost underwater features.

A wizard who's taken to calling himself Maskalar Waterdragon (but who formerly acquired an unsavory reputation in Amn and various Inner Sea ports under several other names, including Alkandor Ilhorn and Surdran Wraethjack) recently came to public attention in Scornubel while selling "power gauntlets of lost Netheril." These are single gloves fashioned so skillfully of forgotten alloys that resemble electrum that they're almost as supple as well-worn leather. Anyone who wears one—not just someone skilled in the Art—can call on the gauntlet's powers: spell-like effects fired as rays or beams from the fingertips of the gloves, one discharge per digit every seven hours. These powers include magic identical to (or closely resembling) *tearing claws*, *blinding bolt*, *lightning daggers*, *gripping chains*, and *ball lightning*.

Waterdragon claims to have recovered many such gloves from a sunken Netherese wizard's tower that he describes as having the shape of a spindle, "with spires both above and below," that has lain under "a remote part of" the Vast Swamp in eastern Cormyr "since the fall of Netheril." He says he kept the best gauntlets for himself, and this claim was borne out when he was attacked by three mages at once—and bested them by unleashing volleys of triple *fireballs* followed by forked lightning bolts. Waterdragon has said that he knows where other ancient treasures lie underwater, still guarded by "things I dare not face."

In the Wizards Reach, a mage from Chessenta named Alamandur Rorskorn warns that drowned Ulsklar, a Netherese archmage who has slept in stasis underwater "for an age, and more" in his sunken citadel, was recently awakened by "overbold" wizards who sought to plunder Ulsklar's home, and is "taking a fell interest in wizards who now hold power in the lands, and think themselves mighty—and are mistaken."

The wizards who roused him, Rorskorn says, deserve whatever fell doom Ulsklar visits upon them, because they made what the Chessentan calls "the reckless fool's mistake." They killed the mistnetters they'd employed to help them clear the way to Ulsklar's citadel.

Rorskorn shared something more with the wider world—something that must have roused ire in Marsember and more than wariness among the Wizards of War in Suzail. According to the talkative Chessentan, certain folk of Marsember have used clearwater for decades to store, hide, and recover smuggled goods from the depths of their own canals, from sunken ships in and near their harbor, and even from long-drowned cellars. In this latter case, they might find a way to enter mansions and Marsembian fortresses through "back doors" that haven't been usable for centuries.

So when next you see folk poling or paddling small open boats into noisome swampland, think twice about

what they may be up to—or what adventurers might get up to, with their able assistance.

About the Author

Ed Greenwood is the man who unleashed the *Forgotten Realms* setting on an unsuspecting world. He works in libraries, and he writes fantasy, science fiction, horror, mystery, and romance stories (sometimes all in the same novel), but he is happiest when churning out Realmslore, Realmslore, and more Realmslore. He still has a few rooms in his house in which he has space left to pile up papers.

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