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ALLIGATORS--ONCE HUNTED TO THE POINT OF NEAR EXTINCTION--GROW BIG ON FWS REFUGES IN SOUTH

Two 11 foot alligators had to be removed from a Fish and Wildlife Service refuge this year because they had developed an unhealthy interest in people--as if they planned on adding man-meat to their diet. Many other 8 to 11 foot alligators (and a few 12 footers) were taken by government licensed hunters, the Service reports, but no 15 to 17 foot alligators of the "old days" are seen any more.

Even two hundred years ago, when still larger alligators were reported, the cases of these reptiles attacking humans were rare. In the last half century a few 15 footers and a rare 17 footer were killed, but even these showed little inclination to attack humans. But this summer at the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge in Georgia an 11-foot bull alligator developed the habit of stalking fishermen and visitors along the canal. Refuge agents roped him and turned him over to the Okefenokee Swamp Park--where he could be studied by visitors and not vice versa.

Two days later on Okefenokee, the refuge manager and another man in a small boat were charged by an 11 foot 'gator - which was promptly shot. Other big 'gators which followed boats were put on the "suspect" list,

At one time alligators ranged widely throughout the coastal marshes and bayous of the Gulf and south Atlantic states. Their hide, however, made excellent leather and they were extensively hunted. Millions of 'gators were killed in the century between 1800 and 1900--more than 2,500,000 in Florida alone--but after 1900 the numbers dropped. Alligators were being killed faster than they could reproduce; the practice of burning marshes killed many young in the nests, and thousands of others were killed to be stuffed and sold as souvenirs or were sold alive as pets.

As the yearly kill of alligators dropped to 50,000 or less a year, there was considerable apprehension on the part of many that Alligator mississippiensis would become an extinct species. In fact, it wasn't until the 1930's when the Federal refuge system received its greatest emphasis that alligator populations began to climb. Most of the refuges were established for the primary benefit of waterfowl, but the 'gators were also protected.

Besides Okefenokee, which was established in 1937, are the Sabine National Wildlife Refuge (established in 1937) in Louisiana and the Delta Migratory Waterfowl

Refuge (established in 1935), also in Louisiana. Other minor alligator havens are the Savannah River Wildlife Refuge, Georgia, the St. Marks Migratory Bird Refuge, Florida, the Cape Romain Migratory Bird Refuge in South Carolina, and the Black-beard Island Migratory Bird Refuge off the coast of Georgia.

The Sabine Refuge was once a big privately owned "alligator farm," but the alligators were pretty well depleted in later years. In 1946, after nearly ten years of Federal regulation, the alligator population had increased to such an extent on the Sabine that the Service permitted licensed hunters to kill about a thousand animals. Now the yearly kill is about 1,500. Of the approximately 15,000 alligators which the refuge supports, only about 5,000 are three feet long or longer.

The cropping of 'gators on the refuge, both necessary and desirable to maintain a balance of wildlife, has continued in the last few years. A few carefully chosen hunters are permitted to take alligators and the Fish and Wildlife Service shares the profit—which amounts to several thousand dollars. The hunters pole their narrow boats about the marshes and canals at night, spotting and holding the alligators by a bright spot-light, and killing them with a shot through the head. The hunters are required to save the alligators' stomachs for scientific analysis by the FWS.

Analysis of stomach contents reveals that 'gators eat crustaceans, reptiles, mammals, fishes, birds, insects and amphibians. The smaller 'gators eat quantities of insects, shrimp, crayfish, minnows and small snakes and turtles. The larger alligators eat the same, but their diet includes a larger proportion of muskrats, raccoons, large birds, big snakes and even an occasional young alligator. Even though alligators eat fur animals, like mink and muskrat, it is concluded that the value of alligator leather outweighs that of the small quantity of fur lost. In any event, the population of large 'gators on the refuge is kept down to a desirable level.

There are two living species of alligators—one is found only in the Southern United States, and the other is confined to the east coast of China. Alligators are aquatic reptiles closely related to crocodiles—the terrifying man-eaters of movie and storybook fame. Crocodiles are found in North America, especially in Central America, but a few specimens are also to be found in Florida. Crocodiles have narrower snouts than alligators, and have teeth which fit into notches alongside the jaw, rather than into pits—as in the alligators.

Alligators make burrows or caves in river and canal banks, and in the winter they either retire to these caves to hibernate or sink into the mud—leaving only a blow-hole for breathing. Being a cold-blooded animal, the 'gator needs the warmth of the sun to keep it active. Mother 'gators use the warmth of the sun to hatch their eggs, also. The mother alligator builds a large nest of vegetable trash and earth and lays 20 to 30 eggs in it, leaving a small opening for the young 'gators to escape after hatching eight weeks later.

This mound of trash—six feet across or more—is usually made near the female's burrow or den. It is generally concluded that the female watches over the nest until the young are hatched, and then calls them to her den where their lives are centered for the next year or two. If it were not for this protection, the numerous raccoons and other predators would dig out the eggs and eat them. Although occasionally a large female will charge a human who is poking about her nest, most alligators are afraid of people and will remain in the background to voice their displeasure.

Alligators grow from seven inches to a foot a year for the first 10 years, and much more slowly after that. Should you see just the eyes and nostrils of an alligator above water, you may estimate his total length by allowing one foot of length for each estimated inch between eyes and nostril. If the alligator's face is a foot long, don't annoy him!