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# Alligator alley

**With gator hunting season extended until Nov. 5, hunters are having little trouble finding their prey**

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**BARTOW** -- Throughout Central and South Florida lately, lakes are abuzz with the sound of airboats at night. That's because the state's annual September public alligator harvest has been extended by the recent rash of hurricanes until Nov. 5.

Other than delaying some hunts, the Charley-Frances-Ivan-Jeanne continuum doesn't seem to have affected the state's robust alligator population -- generally estimated at around one million -- one bit.

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In fact, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission made more gator hunting permits available this year than ever before -- 3,800 -- of which 2,700 have been sold. A few years back, only about 700 permits were issued. With a \$250 permit and two validation tags (\$20 total), hunters are entitled to harvest two gators of any size.

When the public hunt began in 1988, many hunters jumped into it as a money-making enterprise. By the mid-90s, the price of hides spiked to around \$40 per foot. These days, hunters are lucky to get \$20 per foot, even for the prized, larger animals. Experienced alligator hunting guides, such as captain Phil Walters of Tampa, might charge as much as \$600 per night. And with the price of gator tail meat remaining fairly stable at around \$4 to \$5 per pound wholesale, gator hunting has become an extreme sport -- rather than an income producer -- for the average layman hunter.

"It's the joy of being part of the process of pursuing a large animal and a top predator and all the excitement that goes with that," said Harry Dutton, head of the FWC's alligator management section. "People are participating now just to have a good time."

#### **BOUNTIFUL SUPPLY**

One of this season's hot spots is 5,000-acre Lake Hancock, near Bartow in Polk County. Captain Walters said the lake averages one gator per acre -- roughly the population of a small Florida town.

Lake Hancock's proximity to Lakeland's phosphate pits, Walters said, virtually guarantees a steady replenishment of gators. And he said the lake itself is prime habitat.

"[Gators] especially love wax myrtles on a bank. They like floating tussocks -- habitats next to deep water. That's where you'll get a big gator," Walters said.

On a recent weeknight, Walters and his party of two and captain Rick Silkworth and his party of three each harpooned a trophy gator. Silkworth got one that measured 11 feet 4 inches. Walters' customer, Jim Seletos of Tarpon Springs, got one 11-2. Earlier in the night, another Walters client, Mike Moorefield of St. Petersburg, bagged a 7-plus-footer.

"We've got over 10 gators more than 11 feet out of this lake," said Silkworth's fiancé, Tarin Johnson.

## MARINE INFO



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Both hunting guides use similar methods for locating a big gator -- scanning the lakeshore by airboat after dark wearing a battery-powered headlamp. The headlamp picks up the ruby shine of the gators' eyes.

Some gator guides will tell you that the way to discern a large one from a small one is by the width of the space between their eyes. But Walters said he has a better way.

"When I see a gator that -- as soon as I shine the light -- he goes down, I know that he's been playing this game. He's got some size to him," Walters explained.

## GOOD MATH

That calculation proved correct with Seletos' trophy. The large reptile not only ducked beneath the surface when approached in the airboat, but buried itself in thick tussocks when Seletos struck it with the harpoon. Fortunately for the hunters, the sharp, stainless-steel point remained lodged in the gator's tough hide while two men took turns chopping away the vegetation.

When they finally managed to free the gator and the harpoon line from the mat, the animal emerged hissing with jaws snapping wide.

At this point, most hunters would have administered a bangstick, or point-blank explosive charge, to their quarry's head. But Walters doesn't use a bangstick because he believes they are dangerous. Instead, he subdued the gator with a fishing gaff while Seletos taped its jaws shut.

Then, Walters cut its spinal cord with a knife. Only dead was it safe to load into the 13-foot airboat.

Back at the boat ramp at 1:30 a.m., the two men shook hands, made arrangements to distribute the meat and get the hide processed, then drove home -- hoping to get to bed before dawn.



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