

Weekly Planet

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Later, Gator

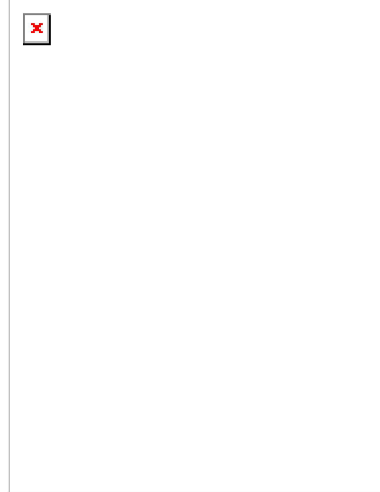
BY SUSAN DIX

The eyes seize you. You could swear they're looking straight at you as they glow above the surface of the lake. The guide's lamplight glides across the water and there they are -- lurking within the bulrushes along the marshy shoreline, skimming the water's center, blinking in the distance at the lake's outermost reaches. The last refrains of daylight have faded into the quiet of evening, and the gators have come out to eat.

But tonight, there's a different breed of predator taking position.

Tonight, Phil Walters is captain of a 280-horsepower engine airboat equipped with tools designed to capture these creatures. He's clearly pumped. It's opening night of the 2001 Florida Public Waters Alligator Harvest in the town of Immokalee, and Captain Phil is ready for some action.

A small farming community in north Collier County about 30 miles southeast of Fort Myers, Immokalee isn't a place most people visit, unless you're a tomato picker or



ABOUT THE COVER Disclaimer: An animal was harmed (and stuffed) in the making of this week's cover. Photo by Bud Lee; design by art director Todd Bates

Alligator Facts

- o The American Alligator is found only in the Southeastern U.S., from the Carolinas, south to Florida and west to Texas. The highest populations are in Florida and Louisiana.
- o There are 23 species of crocodylians worldwide, belonging to four main groups: alligators, crocodiles, caimans and gharials. Alligators in the wild live approximately 50 years. In captivity, they can live up to 60 to 80 years.
- o Alligators prefer freshwater lakes and slow-moving rivers and wetlands, but they can also be found in brackish water habitats. The Florida state record for length is a 14-foot, 5/8-inch male from Lake Monroe in Seminole County; the Florida record for weight is 1,043 pounds.
- o Crocodylians can run up to 11 miles per hour.
- o Alligators become sexually mature by the time they reach 6 feet in length.
- o Alligators are not monogamous. One male may service up to 10 or more females in his territory,



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citrus worker -- or have an interest in the high-stakes bingo and fast-action poker of the Seminole Indian Casino located in the town. Immokalee is a hub for Florida crops. It's an agriculturally rich but dingy town filled with trailers and cluttered yards that serve the seasonal workers who come to labor here.

Immokalee is also home to Lake Trafford, the only major freshwater lake in Southwest Florida and a destination for outdoorsmen looking to hook bass, panfish, catfish, black crinnie or, in early fall, gator.

Tonight, the small pier that allows entrance to the lake is occupied by families fishing and a handful of other hunters in pickups, preparing for the harvest. Captain Phil is backing his burgundy truck down a cement ramp leading to the water's lip as he lowers his airboat into the lake.

Phil is wearing khaki shorts, a polo shirt the color of dried blood, and a ball cap that points out his expertise: "Gator Guide." Phil's friend and partner for the evening is Ed Whalin. Ed's a slight guy in a black T-shirt with a Grand Marnier patch on the left breast, cammo pants and a green Perrier Jouet ball cap. He's smoking a cigarette and looking bored but reasonably amiable. A frayed Confederate flag hangs behind him from a wire pole launching up from the airboat. The men are already bandying about their

depending on its success for territory over other males during breeding season.

- o Alligator breeding season begins in April. Females begin to lay their eggs in late June and early July. In the wild, only about 1 out of every 5 eggs survives to hatch.

- o A mother alligator will respond to the distress call of any hatchling, not just her own. Other adult alligators will respond as well.

- o Alligators can stay under water for about 15 minutes in the summer, 1-2 hours in the winter. (The warmer the outside temperature, the higher the alligator's metabolism.)

- o Adult alligators have no natural predators. Cannibalism, in-species fighting and hunting by humans are the most significant mortality factors.

- o The earliest crocodylians evolved more than 200-million years ago.

Alligators play a key role in maintaining the wetlands. During dry seasons, alligators dig in the mud with their tails and legs, creating wallows, or "gator holes," that provide drinking water for other animals in the wild and create homes for the minnows that eat millions of mosquito larvae when the rains return. They are the top predator in their environment and help to regulate the population of other animals.

When Spaniards first arrived in Florida, they named the large reptiles they encountered "el lagarto," the lizard. It's from this Spanish word that "alligator" derives.

Can I Go On a Hunt to Watch? It's possible. Some participants can purchase an alligator trapping agent's license for \$50 each to assist the selected hunter in taking alligators. Private guides will charge you more than that. Most boats will charter out at \$500-\$800 a day. A list of guides can be found at www.wld.fwc.state.fl.us/gators/other

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"Opening night '91, they caught a 15 footer on a 9-foot boat."

"I saw the biggest one in Okeechobee. Huge."

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"I caught a 13-6. You ever seen one of those?"

There are believed to be more than 1-million American Alligators in the state of Florida, not including those raised on farms. Florida's public waters alligator harvest began in 1998 and is recognized as a model program. Harvest quotas are established each year for licensed hunters to take up to two gators each. Permits are issued based on a random drawing of applicants. An alligator-trapping license costs \$250 for Florida residents, \$1,000 for nonresidents, and two mandatory tags cost \$20 each. This year, 1,533 people were selected for gator hunting. Ed's one of them.

By 7:30 p.m. about six boats of licensed hunters are on the lake. They have from a half-hour before sunset to a half-hour after sunrise to pursue their game. Phil hands out headphones for ear protection to muffle the roar of the airboat's massive propeller and whirs out onto the water. Nothing but a dim circle of light lingers beneath the blackening sky and clouds. Dollar weeds and bulrushes line the swampy perimeter of the lake, where Phil hides out. A 12-volt headlight that runs off the boat's battery is perched on the visor of Phil's ball cap. Crickets the size of sandwiches jump into the dish of the boat.

"There's one right there," says Phil. "He don't look too bad." The beam of Phil's headlight leads to a knobby head poking out of the water. Phil calls out to Ed, "Slap that water!" Ed seems confused. "Huh?" he says. "Slap the water!" Phil repeats. Ed does and the gator goes under. After a few seconds, the gator resurfaces. "There he is. He's mine. Sit down. We're gonna go get him." Phil sparks up the airboat and blows out fast toward the spot where the gator was. Ed pulls out his rod as Phil stands up and circles the boat. At the end of the pole is a big-ass four-pronged hook called a snatch. Ed throws out the line about 10 feet and drags it back toward the boat, hauling in some weeds. He does this a few times, but no luck.

Phil returns to his hideout in the weeds. Swarms of dragonflies hover overhead. A full moon emerges behind the clouds. In the distance, a downpour of rain streaks through the graying

sky. An occasional flash of lightning slices toward the ground.

The beauty of the place seems somehow promiscuous, unordered. Phil talks, all the while keeping his eyes glued to the surface of the lake.

Captain Phil isn't what you might expect in a gator-hunting guide. A retired district sales manager for a wine distributorship, he knows more about marketing and Dom Perignon than the average Acura-driving, San-Pellegrino-drinking accountant.

Phil's aware of the prejudice of those who see hunting as some sort of retreat into our baser instincts, but he doesn't seem to let it get to him. Truth is, the pursuit of a hunt is fun and exciting, an adrenaline rush similar to that of watching a nimble quarterback leap through physical obstacles toward a goal line -- that is, as long as you can get past the idea that the success of a hunt involves terminating the beat of a heart.

"What threatens any animal worldwide with extinction," Phil says, "is loss of habitat. Not hunting. And until you give people a reason to conserve habitat, the animals are going to lose, plain and simple. The hunt gives people a reason to conserve."

This is Phil's mission, getting this message out. He wants the public to be informed about the issue of alligators and state-sanctioned harvests. He and other hunters like him are not kill-thirsty rednecks without consciences or awareness of their prey, but rather recreationalists who understand how the market of a public harvest can help sustain wildlife in its natural environs.

"People are fascinated by these animals that live in their back yards and can eat you," he says. "But people don't understand, they're a cash crop. The hunt puts money back into the ecosystem for conservation. It's what we call sustainable use."

The harvest programs were developed by the state with the aim that the economic and recreational value of alligators would motivate hunters like Phil Walters to protect wetland habitats. The idea is to manage the gator population on a sustainable-yield basis, while recognizing gators as a valuable natural resource. In other words, you take a potential threat and turn him into an ally.

In 1971, all crocodilians worldwide, including American Alligators, were endangered, threatened or declining in

numbers, due to illegal hunting, poaching and smuggling. Through supportive legislation and a cooperative web of international conservation efforts, 16 of the 23 species have been returned to abundance in just 25 years.

The croaking of bullfrogs joins the crickets in an exotic fugue as Phil stops to make a noise in the back of his throat that sounds like something between the bark of a young seal and the deep coo of a dove. When this doesn't seem to elicit a response, Phil begins to yip like a small dog and calls out in the voice of a shrill old lady, "Fifi! Get back here!"

After a few minutes, the head of a gator surfaces again. "This could be a potential victim," Phil says. "Come here, I'm a tourist and I can't swim," he mutters under his breath as he homes in on his prey. The boat turns and for an instant the gator's eyes spark in the light of Captain Phil's headlight. He goes out and circles around noisily again, then cuts the boat's engine. The gator reappears, about 10 to 15 feet out.

"Look at that SOB," Phil says. "He's playing games with us." He fires up the boat and goes at him again, but the gator's too smart. The water looks brown and syrupy beneath the shine of the lamp. "Maybe we should ride the lake a bit," he says. "This one's getting tired of us. Besides, he's making us look stupid."

Phil picks up a Q-beam, an 800,000-candlelight lamp, and waves it across the lake. The night has now completely fallen. No light remains in the sky. Mosquitoes swarm any open flesh they can locate. Phil passes around repellent. Ed lights a cigarette. The frogs go nuts in the weeds, a mad musical croaking that seems to build with the tension of the hunt. As the lamplight skims the water's surface, a pair of amber eyes flashes back in the distance. "There's one," says Phil. "Save the children and the poodles. Off we go."

Phil puts on goggles to keep the thickening bugs from drilling his eyes as the boat flies across the lake.

Florida averages about 15 non-fatal alligator attacks per year. Last year, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission removed some 6,000 alligators statewide where they were a threat to the public. The "nuisance alligators" are harvested by professional alligator trappers licensed by the state to eliminate them. Since the FWC began tracking alligator attacks on humans in 1948, there have been about 250 confirmed reports of attacks. Only 10 of these were fatal, the most recent of which took place on Sept. 12 on Sanibel Island. An alligator attacked an 81-year-old man who was walking his dog.

At 9 p.m. Phil and Ed are circling and dragging lines in pursuit of another pair of blazing eyes. Ed hooks him, but he gets loose. The gator's resistance cuts the 80-pound fireline of the rod. The boat follows the trail of air bubbles, and Ed hooks him again. He lets him out then reels him slowly back in that coy dance between nature and man. By 9:15 he's coaxed him to the boat, but Phil estimates he's just longer than 8 feet. They're looking for something bigger. They let the gator go. "We won't make a purse out of you today," Phil says, considerately.

Once an alligator is caught, it's usually sold to a processor who will pay for its hide and meat. Phil says he can get between \$8 and \$15 per foot for the hide and \$4 to \$6 per pound for the meat. Alligator hides removed from the carcass can be purchased only by licensed fur and hide dealers. Hunters can keep the hide, skulls and other skeletal parts. In 1999, Florida brought in an estimated \$3,352,000 in total sales of meat and hides. This year, Phil says, the market is weak. "Florida waits to see what Louisiana is doing," he says, explaining how the market works. "If you're out here to make money, find another hobby."

Farming alligators is more lucrative than hunting them. In addition to an international demand for alligator leather by high-end fashion manufacturers, alligator meat is considered something of a delicacy. Low in fat and high in protein, all of the meat of an alligator is edible, although tail is considered the choice cut.

There are more than 30 alligator farms in the state of Florida, generating in 1999 approximately 140,000 pounds of meat and over 27,000 hides, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The slow passage of time on the water is surprisingly painless. Maybe it's the focused vigilance -- unlike the wait of fishing, this prey is actually capable of doing equal damage to the predator -- or maybe it's just the comfort of the velvety night. In any case, a sense of general tedium stays at bay.

At 10 p.m., Ed hooks another. "When he gets to the boat, don't say a thing," Phil repeats a few times. "All right, Ed, bring him in."

Ed tries to reel but the pull of the gator frustrates his intent. He lets the beast go out a few times and pulls him back slowly, his pole arched deeply in struggle. Phil barks out orders excitedly -- "Keep your tip down!" "Bring him back!" "Don't let him go under the boat!" -- as Ed strokes the reel and curls back. Ed

brings the gator closer to the boat, and Phil drops in his line to hook it again. Ed's hooked him in the tail, not a secure fix. Phil snags the beast after a few casts, just as Ed's hook tears loose. Phil hands his rod over to Ed and tells him to do the work. The gator stubbornly resists as it leads the boat around like it's on a leash. It rises to split the water. Phil grabs a 4-foot gaff to snare him, but the tool doesn't do the trick.

"Watch out, I'm gonna get the bang stick," he says.

The bang stick is a 5-foot wooden pole outfitted with a .357 shell. Bang sticks make Phil nervous ever since one of his clients, an experienced outdoorsman who hunted dangerous game on four continents, accidentally shot one straight through his finger, shredding flesh and cartilage in a bloody mess more frightening than carnivorous reptiles. But this gator is a big one, and its formidable jaws snapping up against the side of the boat are provocation enough for Phil. He puts the bang stick just beneath the top of the water and shoots the gator in the head with a sharp thrust. He shoots beneath the water so the gator's bone doesn't shatter. Plus, "it would be loud as hell." This way, the shot sounds like a benign pop.

Phil and Ed wrestle the gator in as it whips its jaws about menacingly. Phil decides to reload the bang stick and give the beast another whack. This one proves more subduing. Ed is able to pull the animal to the surface so Phil can grab it around its jaws and tape its mouth. The flimsy black masking tape Phil uses to accomplish this task is not reassuring.

"Goddammit! Sonofabitch!" Phil narrates as the gator rolls over onto its back. The men bend to heave the beast onto the boat. Phil is a panting heap of sweat and determination. Ed is characteristically silent and soldierly. After a brief struggle against the tremendous weight, they drag the gator onto the bow of the boat.

Phil takes out a buck knife with a 3-inch blade and begins to rip through the gator's hide at the back of its head, leaving a ripe jelly-like wound that doesn't bleed. He's cutting the spinal cord. At the other end, Ed takes a knife to the tail of the gator, slicing a hole about five scales back from the tail's tip to insert the tag. If it's not tagged immediately, they run the risk of having Fish and Game taking it off their hands. The state will confiscate a hunter's truck and boat if they suspect him of poaching. "If you get caught poaching, it's just not worth it," Phil says.

The men wash their hands with bleach and soap to kill the slime from the gator's skin. "There's all kinds of bacteria and

shit on these things," Phil says as he scrubs his fingers and palms.

The alligator lies heavy and inert beneath the illuminating shine of Phil's headlight. Phil estimates the thing is 11 feet long and somewhere between 350 and 400 pounds. Plenty of room in its belly for stray cats and yappy dogs. Phil positions its head so that it looks out onto the path of the boat like a trophy as he gets ready to head back to shore. He will unload the gator before a crowd of admiring men.

Back on the shore of Lake Trafford, a group of men gather to see what the hunt has shaken up. Phil and Ed have brought in the first carcass of the night. A scruffy assortment of townspeople stands around to get a glimpse of the animal, circling it like buzzards. Young men with cigarettes dangling from their lips drive up in their pickups and Lincolns. The frogs continue to chirp frantically as this odd social ballet takes place.

"What do you think, guys, 11-2?" Phil says, guessing at his trophy's size as it lies on the ramp by the water's edge. "I'd say 10-4," says one town elder wearing camouflage pants beneath his swollen girth.

"10-4? Do I hear 11-2?"

The atmosphere is slightly giddy, macho, but oddly suspended. Phil offers a cooler of sodas to those lingering around. No beer on harvest night. That's Phil's rule. The men don't want their senses clouded. Someone locates a tape measure and stretches it across the gator from nose to tail. Ten feet 9 inches. Short of 11 feet, but still an impressive catch.

A youngish man approaches with a business card in hand, asking Phil if he has someone to process the alligator. Not 10 minutes dead and the beast is already mentally filleted and transformed into a handbag. Just doing business.

It's nearing midnight. The gator is sprawled heavy and cold on the pavement. There will be no proper burial or final word for the leathery reptilian. Phil and Ed look buzzed. They're eager to get back out on the lake to see what they can snag before daybreak. With the help of a couple of bystanders, they load the gator into the bed of Phil's truck and turn back toward the water.

The thrum of the airboat rips a hole through the night. For a moment, the chirping stops. The hunt resumes.

11.15.01

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