



# DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

## INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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### 15-FOOT ALLIGATORS RARE TODAY; PROTECTION SAVES DEPLETED STOCK

Old-timers report that in years past it was common to catch 15-, 16-, and even 17-foot alligators in the swamps and bayous of southeastern United States and along the Gulf Coast. But today those big 'gators aren't seen. In fact, a 14-foot alligator is a rarity now. The average size taken today is about 5 to 7 feet.

The alligators were sought so industriously by market hunters who sold the hides that the stock soon became depleted in the southeast, and old-timers declare that if these valuable animals are coming back at all it's owing to the protection of such conservation agencies as the Fish and Wildlife Service, of the United States Department of the Interior, the State game commissions, and a few private individuals who realized that these reptiles were fast disappearing.

Throughout the string of national wildlife refuges administered by the Fish and Wildlife Service along the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts, the story is pretty much the same as that of all other forms of wildlife sought by hunters. In the "good old days" the swamps and marshes abounded with 'gators of all sizes--big, medium, and small. But 'gator hides brought good prices, and the crack of market hunters' rifles soon had their effect. 'Gators became scarcer, and those taken were not so big as in former years.

### Conservation Saves 'Gators

In the Okefenokee swamps of Georgia, at one time, the alligator population was unusually large. Many hunters still recall taking large-sized 'gators in quantity from the famous swampland that is now a wildlife refuge. The stock, however, had become so depleted, that by the time the refuge was established, few hunters were making much money from 'gator hides.

That conservation practices pay is evident from the constant increases in the number of alligators on the Georgia refuge. Today there are more of these animals in the Okefenokee swamps than have been seen there in the last 10 or 15 years.

"The refuge sure has brought them back," declared an old hunter who has lived near the swamps all his life.

"I remember I could go on Billies Lake on the refuge and see them 'gators by the hundreds just by paddling up and down and into the little channels," he said. "Then they just kind of disappeared and it wasn't no time at all before there weren't any more. Then when the Government put up the refuge and there wasn't any more killing, it was different. I can see the 'gators coming back, now. Now I can go up Billies Lake on a fishing trip and see maybe 40 or 50 in no time at all."

The same tale is heard over and over again -- on the Savannah River Refuge, in Georgia; the Blackbeard Island Refuge, off the coast of Georgia; the Cape Romain Refuge in South Carolina; the St. Marks Refuge in Florida; and on the Delta Refuge, in Louisiana.

### Catch 'Gators at Night

Experienced hunters found it easy to get alligators because the reptiles apparently are curious animals. Common technique used by market hunters was "jack-lighting". When a small, bright light is flashed towards an alligator at night,

the animal usually swims slowly towards the source of the bright beam. The progress of the 'gator can be followed by the reflection of the light in its eyes.

Apparently fascinated by the glow of a lamp or flashlight, a 'gator will swim so close to the light that a hunter can almost literally place his gun against the animal's head and shoot it.

Asked why 15-foot alligators are seldom if ever seen today even though the animals are plentiful on an area like the Delta National Wildlife Refuge in Louisiana, Refuge Manager John Kilby expressed the opinion that it was because the market hunters in former years shot only the bigger animals, leaving only the smaller (and younger) ones unharmed.

"After a 'gator gets to be 10 feet long," Kilby said, "his growth proceeds at a very slow rate, so slowly in fact that one can hardly see the difference from year to year."

An interesting commentary on the alligator situation along the Mississippi Delta was offered by Cap'n Theodore Johnson, a former market hunter in that region.

"I doubt very much if an alligator more than 11 feet long can be found in these parts now," said the old-time hunter. "Most of those I see along the Delta now average about 5 feet in length. There are plenty of alligators on the Delta National Wildlife Refuge, but few are much more than 10 feet."

Recalling his experiences as a market hunter, Cap'n Johnson said that even in the 1910's, during which period he spent many days in each year shooting alligators, he seldom saw any that were larger than 11 feet in length.

Cap'n Johnson related an incident that occurred when he was looking for alligators in marshes on the upper reaches of the Delta, north of his usual haunts.

"I was just switching off the River into a bayou when I saw this old fellow on his boat. I came up to him and asked if there were any 'gators in the swamps

back there. He told me 'yes,' and I asked him if there were any real big ones, 15 or 16 feet long."

"Son," he said, "I been huntin' them critters a mighty long time, and it's been a mighty long time since I seen any 15-foot 'gators."

But the important thing to Cap'n Johnson and others is that the alligator population is increasing again. Some day the trappers and hunters who depend on the land and water for their livelihood may be able to make a fairly good income by harvesting alligators, taking only the surplus stock on the area.