



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
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ALLIGATORS STILL FORMIDABLE CREATURES, BUT SMALLER

Although alligators remain formidable creatures, they no longer are growing to their former massive proportions, according to records maintained by the Fish and Wildlife Service of the Department of the Interior.

A century ago, 15-foot alligators were pretty much run-of-the-mill. Fourteen-footers were still around as recently as 50 years ago. But today a twelve-foot specimen is regarded as near the maximum.

That is why an alligator measuring 13 $\frac{1}{2}$ feet caused something of a stir when he was hauled out of the water at the Delta National Wildlife Refuge in Louisiana. He was promptly dubbed "Ol' Gram'pa" and entered in the records as the biggest alligator ever taken on Delta Refuge.

Like the buffalo, the alligator has been subjected to heavy hunting in years gone by. Because of the inaccessibility of some of its habitat, however, the alligator has been able to survive in large numbers despite greatly decreased living space and a century of extremely heavy harvesting.

From 1800 until 1891, more than 2,500,000 of these animals were harvested in the State of Florida alone. As late as 1900, some 280,000 alligator skins were being processed in the United States annually. The harvest varies from year to year, and from refuge to refuge. "Ol' Gram'pa" was one of 400 taken last year on Delta Refuge. But on the Sabine National Wildlife Refuge, also in Louisiana, the harvest has been as great as 1,300 in a year.

Several of the refuges in the South have natural habitat for alligators. The Department's Fish and Wildlife Service follows management practices which will assure all species of wildlife as much living room as possible. Alligators are protected until their numbers approach the carrying capacity of their habitat, and then harvesting is permitted.

Among the natural enemies of the alligator are the raccoon and the bear. The raccoon does not match his legendary shrewdness against the snapping jaws and the whipping tail of an alligator, and the bear does not engage the 'gator in direct conflict. But the alligator is an egg-laying reptile, and the raccoon and the bear obtain those morsels with comparative safety.

The young alligator is eight inches long at hatching, and weighs about two ounces. It gains only a half-pound the first year and is prey of a number of denizens living in or near the water. Even larger young 'gators are fair food for gar and other fish which reach large dimensions.

But at three years, the alligator weighs about 15 pounds and measures three feet. He then is able to take care of himself against most adversaries.

Drouth is a distinct enemy of the alligator. It kills a lot of the things upon which the alligator feeds, and destroys his natural habitat.

As with many other examples of wildlife, individual alligators are "tagged" for purposes of biological study. Fish and Wildlife Service personnel do their alligator tagging at night from small boats. They confine their efforts to the juveniles, avoiding personal tussels with alligators more than three feet long. When tagging operations are under way, a dozen or two of the animals are caught during an evening, and the metal tags affixed.

Alligator hides do not attract high prices on the market. Three or four decades ago, a seven-foot specimen would be worth from 90 cents to \$4.65, depending for the most part upon the location of the market and the quality of the hide. Pricing today is based on a per-foot-of-alligator basis, with prices ranging from \$1.25 to \$2.50 per foot.

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