

# ALLIGATOR HUNTING

by John and Heidi Rao

Just a few decades ago, the American alligator was on the brink of extinction. Conservation efforts along with strict laws have given the alligator a strong comeback to numbers not seen since the 1800's. Alligators have become so numerous that all states in their native range had to develop Nuisance Alligator Programs to deal with problem animals. Just about every state in the Southeastern United States has some type of closely regulated hunting season for these prehistoric creatures.

The equipment used to hunt alligators is very simplistic. It includes a stout line, a large hook, and some ripe or rotting meat. The baited hook is attached to the line and hung between two and three feet over water near the bank. Normally the line is suspended from a cane pole that is pushed in the mud, angled over the water. The line is then either staked off or tied to a solid support such as a tree. The higher the bait is suspended over the water, the larger the alligator.

Alligator sets are usually set early in the afternoon and checked the following morning. Even though alligators are opportunistic feeders and are always looking for food, the times between dusk and dawn are when they are most actively searching for food. Once an alligator takes the bait, the hunter then can "crab line" the alligator slowly to the surface. More times than not, the alligator offers very little resistance when slowly pulled to the surface. When the head breaks the surface of the water, it can then be dispatched.

Alligators can be taken by firearm, archery equipment, or spear. Regardless of the method used, the only way to effectively kill an alligator is to pierce its walnut-sized brain. This area is located in the center of the skull, behind its protruding eyes. A well placed shot in this region can immediately produce a limp animal. A shot that does not pierce the brain turns this animal into a twisting, thrashing, tail slapping, and mouth snapping demon!

It is a good idea that after an alligator is killed or perceived dead, the mouth is taped shut. It is possible that the animal is only stunned or knocked unconscious, only to awaken causing a potentially dangerous situation. There is also the risk of nerves being responsible to an unintended bite. Also, the tail can delivery a painful slap long after the animal dies because of twitching nerves.

There are clues that the hunter should recognize to indicate the presence of an alligator when looking for a place to set a line. There are three common signs that could alert one of a potential threat of an alligator. These are slides, nests, and dens. Slides are by far the best and easiest indicator that an alligator is present. A good "rule of thumb" is the bigger the slide, the bigger the alligator. All alligators make slides when climbing out of the water and sliding back in.

Alligator slides are the easiest sign to spot. Slides are an area on the bank where an alligator routinely enters and exits the water. The spot is on the water's edge and the slide itself is normally muddy and devoid of vegetation. This is caused by the belly of the alligator crawling out onto the bank and "sliding" back into the water. The slide will be mostly located in tall vegetation or a grassy area, except for the muddy spot

caused by the sliding. Many times the slide will be horseshoe-shaped. The alligator crawls up at one spot of the bank then curves around to the spot where it re-enters the water.

Slides can be located anywhere along the bank. More often, slides coincide with geological features in the shoreline. Slides tend to be situated in the inside bends of the waterway or on small peninsulas. Outer edges of bends in the waterway are usually steeper and are higher off the water than the inside bends. Peninsulas are good spots for alligators because they tend to gradually enter the water. These areas usually draw prey to the water's edge and allows for an easier ambush. These areas also offer the alligator a good vantage point for surveying and avoiding potential dangers.

Always be aware of your surroundings when alligator hunting. This animal is a predator and is also engaged in hunting. This is one of the few times that a hunter can turn into the hunted because of carelessness. Whether you can spot the signs or not, the alligator is going to see you long before you see it. The number one rule when in alligator country is – Do not be afraid of the alligator you see, but of the one you don't see! Always remember – Safety First!!!