

# KILLERS AFLOAT

**A**LTHOUGH crocodiles are found in America, Africa, India, southern China, Malaysia, in Papua, Fiji, and other Pacific Islands, nowhere are they so plentiful as in the hundreds of virgin, sluggish, tropical rivers along the little-known and sparsely populated coast of northern Australia. These rivers are literally teeming with crocodiles—huge salt-water crocodiles, *Crocodylus porosus*, which are among the largest living reptiles known. These monsters attain the amazing length of thirty feet or more, and eat anything from fish to human beings. No other animal is more dangerous and cunning.

At present there is an increasing demand for the crocodile, due to the commercial value of its skin, and, as a result, the crocodiles of northern Australia are attracting the attention of hunters.

Hunting the reptiles is profitable as well as dangerous. In Australia, the skins, which are exported to all parts of the world to be used in the manufacture of women's shoes, handbags, novelties, and so on, fetch an average price of about \$10, while the huge teeth are exported to the Orient and Europe to be used in making small knife handles, buttons, and the like. The average salt-water crocodile has thirty-six upper and thirty lower teeth, ranging from about two inches to six inches in length. An oil extracted from the man-eaters is in great demand in China, where it is applied to relieve rheumatism and other muscular complaints. An idea of how profitable hunting these saurians is may be gained from the fact that one hunter recently spent two weeks at the Alligator River, and shot 120 crocodiles, which returned a clear profit of \$1,000.

Hunting the man-eaters is a perilous occupation, calling for strong nerves, and great courage. A hunter never becomes blasé, because the excitements are never-ending. Danger is always there, and carelessness may mean death in the terrible jaws of repulsive monsters that never, while they live, give up their prey. Compared with crocodile hunting, sword-fishing and other thrilling sports are larks.

In northern Australia the reptiles are obtained by shooting and trapping, but neither method is easy. While it is a common sight to see scores of the creatures sunning themselves on the river banks, or on sand banks and rocks in the middle of the streams, it is difficult to get close enough to shoot one. The speed with which a big crocodile can glide from the bank into the river, or drop from a sand bank at the slightest alarm, is almost incredible.

In shooting the reptiles, the hunter has to be an expert shot, for the crocodile has only a few vulnerable spots. Simply to blaze away at the great armor-plated bodies is waste of time and bullets. Only a bullet through the eye, ear, or mouth is likely to prove fatal. A wounded crocodile is extremely vicious, and a hunter must be quite sure that the reptile is really dead before he approaches too close. Moreover, a croc-

## BEARING LIKE SOME DRAGON IN A FABLE

We came upon him suddenly in the jungle some yards from the river. His eyes gleamed savagely, as he rose on his hind legs, and dashed for the water

Drawings by R. G. SEIELSTAD



#### HUNGERING FOR FRESH VICTIMS

The cruel mouth of a huge, salt-water crocodile common in northern Australia. Giants of their kind, they sometimes grow to 30 feet or more long, and are partial to children as food

codile often will feign death, and with one swish of its tail will fracture the incautious hunter's legs.

Trapping, although involving much more work, is a surer method of obtaining the creatures. Carcasses of wallabies or other marsupials, tied to trees on river banks and liberally treated with strychnine, are regularly used, and invariably bring results. But, in such cases, the crocodiles usually return to the river to die, and a search has to be made in boats for their floating bodies.

The best method of trapping the monsters is one that causes the crocodile to drown itself. An eighteen-inch noose of steel wire, attached to a long rope, is suspended from a floating log. A bait of meat is hung from the bottom of the noose, and, when the offering is gulped down by the crocodile, he finds his upper jaw encircled firmly by the biting wire. A terrific struggle ensues as the crocodile fights madly to escape. It is the floating log that balks him. If the noose were attached to an immovable object, the wire would soon break. The log, though, keeps bobbing up and down, pulling the crocodile's mouth open. After fifteen minutes or so the crocodile dies—drowned by the water which pours down its gaping mouth.

In another effective method, ingenious traps are set at intervals of a few yards along both banks of a river. The traps consist of four long, stout saplings, driven into the ground to form a square with four-foot sides. A cross-piece is attached to the tops of the front pair of saplings, and another to the tops of the rear pair. From each cross-piece is hung a large loop of steel wire. To reach the bait, which is tied

to a stake driven in the ground about two feet behind the rear pair of saplings, the crocodile has to crawl through these loops. A heavy bag of sand is suspended from a branch of a nearby tree by a steel wire which passes over the branch and connects with the two loops in the trap. As soon as the crocodile passes through the loops and disturbs the bait, he releases a trigger which lets the bag of sand fall, drawing the loops tight around his body. The monster is thus held fast until the arrival of the hunter, who regularly patrols the river banks watching the traps. A well-aimed bullet puts an end to the man-eater's struggles. I have never known a crocodile to escape from one of these traps.

**I**N THE water, crocodiles are bold, ferocious, and sly. When lying motionless and partly submerged, they closely resemble big logs. Floating with hardly a ripple, they are on their prey before the latter is aware of their approach. They often seize their victim from the edge of the river bank. Recently, in northern Australia, a man was riding a horse along a river bank when a crocodile grabbed the horse by a hind leg, and dragged the animal and its rider into the river. Neither was seen again. It is by no means unusual for a crocodile to come ashore for its prey. In addition to being excellent swimmers, they are surprisingly quick in their movements on land. Although their limbs are short and seemingly inadequate for walking, they can travel on land for miles, and even run when occasion demands. Often, when hungry, they go exploring the jungle, moving with a quietness that is uncanny.

It was while he was on one of these exploring trips that Bill and I first met Big Ben, as we later nicknamed him. Looking for a camping spot, we came upon him suddenly in the jungle about 100 yards from a sluggish river. The massive brute's little eyes gleamed savagely, and then, with the crocodile's instinctive shyness of man, he rose on his hind legs, like some dragon out of a fable, and ran off at a great speed for the river.

In the days that followed, we killed many crocodiles, but wasted scores of bullets in a vain endeavor to shoot Big Ben. He was the biggest crocodile either Bill or I had ever seen, so we were determined to get him. Often we sighted him as he sunned himself on the river bank, but always, before we could get within shooting distance, he would slip noiselessly into the water. And then Big Ben would reveal his cunning in an irritating game of hide and seek, cruising slowly along in the water with only his long snout showing above the surface, like a floating piece of wood. He looked an easy target, but, whenever a gun was raised to shoot, or a hand moved to pull a trigger, the snout would sink, to bob up again a few yards away. Then, when he tired of this, Big Ben would flick his long, flattened tail, and drive his massive body through the water with powerful, rhythmic sweeps until soon he was lost in the distance.

But he always returned. Daily he took heavy toll of wallabies and kangaroos as they drank at the edge of the river, and wild pigs as they wallowed in the shallows. But never would he touch our traps, in which dozens of other crocodiles met their doom.

Then, when nights grew warmer, the jungle echoed with hoarse bellowings as Big Ben roared out from the river the strange mating call of his kind. He kept it up for hours with scarcely a pause. So startling were the cries that other noises of the night were quieted. When finally Big Ben did stop, a deathly silence brooded over the jungle.

Toward midnight one night, just as

Giant crocodiles, gliding noiselessly through the ooze of Australia's northern swamps, are the villains of this stirring account of strange and perilous hunting

By EWEN K. PATTERSON



This immature crocodile, taken in the steaming jungle of northern Australia, is only 15 feet long, but in one week he dragged four children to their death in the tropic swamp.

the moon was rising. Big Ben's bellows took on a different tone—a tone of victory. The roar was so fierce and fascinating that Bill and I grasped our rifles, and crept down to the river, reaching it just in time to see a pair of crocodiles slip noiselessly from the opposite bank into the stream. It was Big Ben and his latest bride.

The crocodiles spent their honeymoon in seclusion. We did not sight them for several weeks. Then one morning we stepped from the dark-green of the jungle into a clearing on the river bank to find in the center of that sun-bathed opening a yard-high pile of mud, twigs, and leaves. Alongside was a wallow of charmed mud, just above the surface of which showed the serrated back of a large crocodile. It was that of Big Ben's wife, guarding her nest of eggs. She seemed to sense our presence, for in a second, so it seemed, she was out of her wallow. Opening her huge jaws, she emitted a hoarse bellow, and rushed toward us. She chased us to the edge of the clearing, and, when satisfied that we had departed, she returned to her task of guarding her nest.

At each sitting, the female crocodile lays between sixty and a hundred eggs, white, and a little larger than duck's eggs. Depositing them on a pile of mud and vegetable debris, she covers them lightly with twigs and leaves, and leaves them to be hatched by the heat of the sun. The whole time, night and

day, the mother remains on guard, for there are many jungle creatures, such as wild pigs, that have a taste for eggs.

Big Ben himself occasionally visited his wife, spending hours lying beside her in the mud, but at no time could we get a chance to put a rifle bullet into a vital spot.

Then came a stifling hot morning, when, under the fierce rays of the sun, the surface of the nest heaved, and in an instant became alive with baby crocodiles, between six and eight inches long, tiny creatures with pale, spotted skin. It seemed incredible that such midgets could ever attain the size of Big Ben or his wife.

For several hours, the babies frolicked in the mud, snapping at each other with tiny jaws equipped with needle-sharp teeth. Then the mother moved slowly toward the river, and the babies followed her clumsily in line, each with a portion of the egg yolk still sticking to its stomach, to serve it as food until it developed sufficiently to be able to fend for itself.

But very few of those babies survived more than a week of life. Once they reached the river, their parents deserted them, and, in the days that followed, big fish took a heavy toll of the helpless infants, while many

more were snatched up by birds and snakes as they basked in the sun on the river banks. Some of them, too, were even eaten by their own parents. Once we saw Big Ben gobble up two of the children as they played together on a mud bank in the center of the stream.

The time arrived for us to break camp, and move downstream. After two weary days of hacking our way through the dense jungle that fringed the river, we reached the broad mouth of the stream.

On that journey we were accompanied the whole time by Big Ben. Each day he cruised slowly along, with only his snout showing, keeping abreast of us. He stopped at night when we stopped, and spent the dark hours hunting. Late one night, we were awakened by the terrified squeals of a wild pig close at hand, squeals that died away to a choking gurgle as Big Ben dragged his victim under the water.

When we reached the river mouth, Big Ben grew more daring than ever. Late one afternoon, we sighted him crawling through the bush toward our camp. A couple of bullets, although not harming him, sent him scampering back to the river. But the next day he took a terrible vengeance.

A party of natives had arrived from the north on their way to attend a corroboree, or tribal festival, at a camp some miles to the south. To cross the river, they used a frail, bark canoe, which held three men. From a distance, Big Ben watched the canoe cross and recross the stream. He scarcely moved in the water until the last canoe load was in the center of the stream. Then he surged forward. The two native men, and the woman who sat between them, saw him coming, but they had no chance. Big (Continued on page 29)



#### FATAL TO THIRST

Wallabies and kangaroos, coming down to the river to drink, found the jaws of Big Ben awaiting them.

# Killers Afloat

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Ben hooked a great claw over the side of the canoe, seized the woman in his jaws, and dived. The canoe capsized, and, in blind panic, the men swam for shore.

Two days passed before Big Ben was seen again. One morning, through the bushes, we caught a glimpse of him, sunning himself on a secluded part of the river bank. Creeping noiselessly forward, we trained our rifles on his head, and fired. As our bullets struck him, Big Ben leaped into the air, and then lay still. We rushed forward, and Bill grabbed hold of the monster's tail to drag him farther from the edge of the water.

This came close to being my friend's last earthly gesture, for, although Big Ben was wounded, the big saurian had not lost any of his natural cunning. Our bullets had struck home, but the crocodile had still one last, malevolent blow to deliver.

As soon as he felt Bill's hand upon him, Big Ben, with an irresistible swing of his tail, swept Bill into the river, then plunged in after him. Fortunately, the water was not deep, and Bill was able to scramble ashore before the crocodile could find him.

That was Big Ben's last act. One of our bullets had penetrated an eye—a vital spot—and, after an hour, during which he rolled over and over in the water, churning it to foam, he died.

He measured exactly twenty-five feet from the tip of his snout to the end of his tail. A monster? Yes, but small when compared with a crocodile killed some time previously in the Pioneer River, near Mackay in North Queensland. That crocodile measured thirty-two feet nine inches. Never before had a larger salt-water crocodile of that species been destroyed anywhere in the world. But, regardless of his length, *Crocodylus porosus* is a beast to strike fear to the heart of even the most dauntless hunter.