

ALLIGATOR SHOOTING IN FLORIDA.

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Continued.



ESIROUS at one time to secure a young saurian, in order to have it mounted, I shot at the neck of one which was about forty yards from my pier. All that I could see of the animal was the end of the nose, so that I had to guess at the position of the neck, yet I was fortunate enough to send a bullet through it from side to side. It did not move after being hit, so I sent one of my negroes in the boat to bring it in. He grasped it by the head, paddled ashore, and placed it near my feet on the veranda of the house. I examined it carefully, then measured it, and found it to be a few inches over four feet. I was quite pleased with my capture when I found that the hole in the neck would not be prominent when the skin was stuffed, and that the size was about what I wanted. I left it on the veranda for dead and started to attend to some other business which kept me engaged for two hours. At the end of that time I returned to the house and was surprised to find my captive gone. I sought for it eagerly and finally saw it crawling under the house. I poked a long stick at it to hasten its movements, and was astonished to see the creature seize the prodder and shake it viciously, but still keeping its hold. Thinking I could pull it to me without much trouble, I tugged at the stick and the alligator tugged against me, bracing its feet, as if it had learned the art in a regular saurian tug-of-war team. I proved the victor in a short time, yet the determined creature would not let go its hold, even when I held the stick and itself off the ground to a height of four feet. The outer curtains of the eyes frequently blinked while I held it out, proving that the sunlight was too much for them; still it clung, and shook its head

and swept the air with its tail, and displayed its meanness generally. As it would not quit its hold, I put a rope around its neck, but not tight enough to choke it, and handing the cord to the negro, he dragged it after him, as he would a struggling cur, until he put it in the boat. On reaching the village in which the taxidermist lived, the colored man hauled his captive ignominiously through the streets, much to the enjoyment of some of the inhabitants, who asked him what kind of a pup that was, and if he was training him for the 'coon-hunting season. The fate of that pugnacious saurian was as ignominious as its march, for an inquisitive pig and itself became engaged in a quarrel the same day and the porker not only killed but devoured it. This being an unusual turning of the tables, it brought piggy some compliments for its bravery.

The flesh of the alligator is white and edible, but quite fibrous. Were it not for the choking musky odor which renders it so repulsive to white people, alligator steak would be preferable in many instances to that taken from a Florida cow. Hogs and dogs devour the fresh meat with keen relish, and negroes and Indians are glad to get it when other pabulum is scarce. The tail is a favorite dish with some of the natives of South America, and, as a luxury, ranks next to the flesh of another reptile, the iguana; and how good the latter is may be inferred from the fact that epicures consider it to combine the flavor of the chicken with the tenderness of the frog and the green turtle. It is, in fact, as highly prized by all classes as the *murana* was by the ancient Romans.

When the Seminoles of Florida wanted alligator steaks in the early part of this century, they went to a lake where the animals were numerous, and by thrashing the water with sticks and paddles, and shouting lustily, drove the game shoreward, where it was killed by old and young with all sorts of weapons and missiles. No wonder these tribes fought long and bravely for their hunting grounds,

for it is doubtful if any equal area on the continent could furnish savages good food in such wanton abundance as Florida, particularly along the coast.

It is quite an easy matter to "corral" alligators, by building fires in a circle over certain areas. They seem to have the greatest fear of a fire on land, and not only will they not come near it, but they will go as far from it as they think advisable. The hunter who has lain in his blankets near a blazing fire and close to a Florida stream or lake, must have been deeply impressed by the loneliness of his surroundings when he heard the complaining cries of the saurians on beholding the strange and fearful glare. These cries are frequently sounded in many keys, from the impatient grunt of disturbed repose to the plaintive, measured groaning of lazy contentment and the deep bellow of suddenly-aroused anger. The volume of noise which an adult bull alligator can produce when trying to drown the voice of a rival is most remarkable, and hardly to be believed by a person not acquainted with his lung capacity. When several are exercising their vocal organs at a time, the air seems to vibrate and to send the sound through the forest like the rolls of muffled bass drums. One can, therefore, imagine the nasal power of a canoeist of national fame, whose snoring at Homosassa was generally supposed by the guests of the hotel to be produced by a grand chorus of all the adult saurians in Florida, until an investigation revealed the truth.

Alligators were formerly shot only for sport, but since their hides have become valuable for the manufacture of purses, hand satchels, slippers, and hunting boots, a certain class of persons, generally known as "gator scalpers," have made a special business of killing them. These men carefully reconnoitre a region before commencing work, and when they find one where the saurians are abundant they pitch their camp in a sheltered spot and lay in provisions for a certain length of time. A scow or skiff is then built, if none has been brought with them, and the guns and jack lamps are put in order. If the men work during the day they frequently use a hound or a hog for bait to lure the saurians within gun range. To make the one howl and the other squeal is sufficient to bring every alligator within hearing to the top of the water, where it lies like a log until it has located the

animal, then sinks noiselessly and swims shoreward. It rises frequently for bearings, and on approaching its intended victim scarcely makes a ripple. When it is near enough to attack, it bends its tail into a half circle, and letting fly backward gives the live bait a tremendous whack which either kills, cripples, or throws it into the water, where it is instantaneously seized by the powerful jaws. The captive animals are so terror stricken on seeing the alligators approach that they appear to become paralyzed, and unable to utter a sound, or so crazed with fear as to scream in the loudest and most heartrending manner. It is not often that professional hunters allow the reptiles to capture their live bait, for the moment the saurians lift their heads above water a ten gauge, loaded with buckshot, sends its contents into their eyes, causing instant death, or a magazine rifle empties its bullets into their brains. Most hunters pursue their calling at night, this giving them not only a better opportunity of luring the animals within gun range, but also preventing the latter from seeing the character of their foes. These men scarcely utter a whisper while at work, and move about on the inky water as noiselessly as phantoms.

Three men generally form a "gang," but two are sufficient if the saurians are not very abundant, and a jack lamp is used instead of the ordinary fire pan. When the former number get into a boat, one man is stationed as a lookout behind the lamp, a second sits amidships with a loaded breechloader in his hands, and the third uses a long pole for pushing the craft. When the lookout espies the glittering eyes of an alligator he waves his hand to the steerer, who poles the boat in the direction indicated. Not even a "coon's whisper" is uttered by any person, and this renders it necessary that the poler and lookout should readily understand each other's sign language. On approaching the alligator, the craft is pushed so slowly and silently that the most cautious saurian only looks at it in bewildered astonishment or blinks sleepily at the unusual glare. On drawing quite close the armed hunter pours the contents of his gun into the eyes of the animal, and kills it almost instantly, as the leaden pellets reach the brain without meeting any obstruction. Were a rifle used instead of a shotgun, the number of misses would be much greater, and the probability is

that many alligators fatally wounded would escape and be lost. The person who has not tried rifle shooting at night would be surprised at the number of apparently easy shots missed, especially in fire hunting, when objects seem so near and are yet so far. Very few men can feel much assurance of killing a saurian at night with a rifle, for unless it is hit in the eye or the brain it will carry off a good load of lead without seeming any the worse for it. The great difficulty in killing alligators is to get at the brain, that organ being unusually small and pointed; hence, a rifle ball is more liable to miss than hit it. A more experienced "gang" of hunters will capture from ten to fifty alligators in a night, and more if they have unusually good luck. This is paying work, as a salted green alligator hide is worth from fifty cents to a dollar and a half, the average price being about a dollar. The most successful hunters I ever met were two crackers who slew three thousand saurians in six months and pocketed as many dollars for their hides.

I asked one of these men if he had ever been attacked by an alligator. "No," was the reply, "because I never gave one a chance. I always kill my 'gator before he gets his mad up bad enough to pitch into me, though I have often seen one grab at the boat or lash it with his tail. Green hands at the business get hurt, however, by taking hold of the 'gator's tail before the critter is dead."

"Are alligators inclined to fight when wounded?" I asked.

"That depends," he said. "They will jump at anything when they're crazy with wounds, but if you don't put yourself in their way they're more likely to try to get off than to fight."

"Did you ever know an alligator to make an unprovoked attack on a white man?"

"Not a bull 'gator," he an-



swered, "except in one instance, and perhaps that might be called a provoked case. The man was cleaning fish at the mouth of the Cootee River, and throwing the entrails into the water. There were some 'gators round the head of a bend that were devouring the offal, and as it became scarcer they drew closer to the pile of fish on shore. The fishermen wasn't out that day to feed 'gators, so he began thrashing the water and throwing sticks and stones at them. A huge old bull 'gator, who must have been the father of all the others, didn't like this, and made an open-mouthed rush at the man. That fellow was scared, I tell you, for he went ashore so fast that he made as great a noise and raised as high a sea as if he was a porpoise charging into a school of mullets. The 'gator put off after scaring him, and Bill Smith told me that the old bull had a grin six feet long on his face, and was shaking his fat sides with laughing."

"What made him grin so?"

"Why, the bull was so old and toothless that he couldn't hurt anything, and of course it made him laugh to see how easy it was to frighten some people."

"Is that the only case you know of?" I queried.

"It's the only one I know of myself, but I could tell you lots of yarns 'bout fellows who were supposed to have been killed by 'gators in Dade and Monroe counties."

I told him that I had a large stock of such tales on hand, and his prompt reply was: "Very likely; but ain't you found most of them to be jest only lies—regular nigger lies?"

I replied that I had traced some of them, and knew they were partially true.

He looked at me in a very scrutinizing manner for a few seconds, then blurted out:

"Blame me if they ain't keeful in talkin' before you, or else they'd stuff you as full of blood-curdling 'gator stories as a dime novel is full of Injun blood. There is many an 'Alligator Pratt' in this part of the State."

His candor was most amusing, so I asked him if he had any idea as to the number of alligators shot for their hides every year.

"No, and I don't b'leve you can find out," he said. "Those Tampa and Jacksonville hide buyers wouldn't tell you, even if they could, for thousands of 'gator

hides go out of the State without passing through their hands."

That the number of saurians in Florida is diminishing rapidly may be inferred from the fact that the cattle men in the southern part of the State complain of the destruction of the animals. This complaint seems strange coming from persons who are so often compelled to deplore the voracity of the saurians, but it seems they have cause for it. The alligators excavate holes; these holes fill with water, and the cattle resort to them in times of drought when the streams and lakes are dry. The slaughter of the saurians causes these holes to fill up with weeds and rubbish, consequently there is no water for the cattle, and they sometimes suffer severely or die from thirst.

This is another plea for the life of the alligator from an economic standpoint, but I fear it will carry no more weight in this case than it did in that of the buffalo, whose water-filled wallows saved the lives of many pilgrims of the plains. There is little fear, however, that the alligator will become extinct in this century, for it is not only very prolific, but it has food in abundance and many means of escaping its great enemy, man, which more valuable animals have not. Were the real value of the alligator known, it would be destroyed more wantonly than it is. The hide is, primarily, the most valuable part, then come the teeth, which are made into watch guards, breast pins, earrings and other articles, which meet a ready sale at good prices. Teeth in the best condition are worth from one to five dollars per pound, and at retail sell for ten times that amount. The flesh is eagerly devoured by dogs, pigs and fowls, and the oil extracted from it is worth from twelve to twenty-five cents a gallon. When the meat is deprived of its oily matter and smoked or dried, it makes an excellent food for some domestic animals. Here is an opportunity for an energetic person to start a factory and prepare the flesh for this purpose. The article is good, the market is open, the field of operations large, and no opposition.

I have been trying to obtain some accurate information as to the number of alligators destroyed every year, but have not succeeded thus far. I notice that two firms in Jacksonville advertise steadily for 100,000 green salted hides; by allowing that each receives this quantity annually

we have a basis of 200,000 to start on. Admit that tourists kill 2,000; that twice as many are slaughtered for sport by natives, and that 20,000 or 30,000 hides are sent direct to Northern and Western markets, and we have 246,000, or say, in round figures, 250,000 alligators destroyed each year in Florida. Add to this number those slain in Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas, and I think it would be safe to estimate the annual destruction at half a million.

The highest number that fell to my rifle in one day was twenty-eight, though I shot several more, and my best score in a night, using a shotgun, was seventeen. The toughest alligator I ever met was one which carried thirteen of my 40-60 rifle cartridges and a short .22 pistol bullet in its head before I was able to tow it ashore. I was engaged for four hours in killing this one, and when I finally got a rope round its tail, it took two men pulling in a boat and myself walking in the water, and heaving with all my might, to get it to my pier. Its head was one mass of holes, which presented a hideous appearance owing to the protrusion of the bones, yet the reptile had so much vitality that it was able to drench me from head to foot, and shove my boat off its back after receiving my last bullet. This animal was exactly nine feet seven and a half inches in length, and we estimated it to weigh nearly 200 pounds.

The largest alligator to fall to my rifle was twelve and a half feet long—as measured with an eight-foot paddle; this was so heavy that I let the tide take the carcass away after I had secured the head. I killed it by a shot in the mouth while it was yawning, the bullet coming out at the spinal column. I fired at it from an esti-

mated distance of 500 feet, and in the presence of a large "gang" of negroes who were clearing an orange grove for me, and eagerly watching the success of the shot. Their exclamations of approbation were quite flattering when they saw the alligator close its mouth suddenly and disappear in the muddy water; one individual expressing his opinion by shouting emphatically:

"I don't nebeh want you to fire at me, boss. I'd be a gone 'coon, shoo, if you did."

"Nor me nudder," exclaimed others, in a diplomatic way, which was quite amusing.

I never before saw such a tremendous cavity acting as a mouth for an animal, and the fact that I was able to plant a bullet in it at the distance mentioned proves that it was large enough to be no disgrace to a stump orator.

I have enjoyed some ludicrous situations while engaged in saurian hunting with our colored (green) brethren, for if there is any living thing of which they have a wholesome fear it is an alligator, and next to that, a "bad dog." Bayonets have no terrors compared with the jaws of these two creatures. I asked one athletic individual why he was so much afraid of alligators, and he replied:

"I heard a man in Jefferson County say dat de reason 'gatahs was so black was, kase in old times, 'bout de flood time, 'gatahs used to live on cullud people, and dat made 'em so bad they was kicked out o' d' Ark by Noah or his mudder. Now, I don't want 'em to get any blacker by eatin' me; not if I kin help it. No, sir, you can't get me to tech de tail of a possuming 'ole gatah. I ain't ready to die yet."

