

## Boyz in the Muck



### A Six-foot Gator Takes a Flop

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When the river is churned up by storms and wind, a light cloud of muck spreads from end to end of the Wekiva--muck in suspension follows us wherever we kayak--particle after particle descending, releasing, revolving, banking, clogging, coagulating, decomposing, but eventually bottoming and compacting, drying, burning, peating, and repeating. We have to keep on writing these particibles to remind ourselves how dynamic the darkness is where the gator homes.

When I was a teen, we hunted gators at night in light wooden canoes. It never occurred to me that the only thing that kept me from being engulfed in the darkness of muck up to my neck was our simple shell surface, going over logs and cypress knees, around snags and over gator-grime. There the great gators navigate somehow with the grace, speed, and assurance of a line-backer moving through the opposing line. I say this to scare no one. I still assume I am safe in a canoe or kayak, and imagine that, if I fall out, I will simply stand up or swim as best I can, eventually reentering the safety of the bark before a gator gets charged up. Of course, when I hear a large gator grunt in the sawgrass or under the spatterdock, a certain chilly sting hits me between the ventricles.

In those days, I was not afraid of capsizing, but of grabbing the gator in the wrong hold or of miscalculating the size of its body. No one in his right mind would hunt gators bare-handed in the muck without a canoe or row boat as security and certainly not in the dark.

The premise of hunting at night is that the gator is asleep with its eyes open. Don't you love that logic? With a miner's lamp strapped to your forehead, one of us hangs out over the bow, arms free to direct the other at the stern. Both humans watch for the large orange reflectors at the water's edge. Seeing a pair, you can estimate the width of the head. Even a single eye can reveal something about the size of the antagonist, but of course, there is no telling whether the eye is charged by Cambrian dreams or by the more immediate vision of us. Once you get the impression the gator is awake or too big, you wave your comrade off. I look for the movement of the eyes across the water, but usually the gator, if he wants to move, simply dissolves underward.

As we get closer to our prey--what a joke it seems to me now, the foolish teen and the equally foolish three or four foot gator--the idea is to make sure that no shadow from the light crosses the sleepy eye. We swing to the gator's rear so I hang out over his head, ready to grab with one hand directly on his neck and the other about where the tail begins. All this is based on an estimate of our gator's length from the diameter of the eyes and the width between them. That's all you can see above the water in the light of the caveman's lamp. One grab is all you get, a thrill to last a lifetime.

I did most of my gator hunting with my friend Roland when we were counselors in summer camp, and I can remember well, how uncomfortable I was the first time we brought a gator into our canoe and wrapped his jaws shut. I had a great sense of achievement, but while I hung out over the bow again, I kept distrusting the security of that muzzle and I calculated that, were he to thread himself loose, a considerable fury would unleash at my bare toes and feet.

I don't remember catching a gator and throwing him back. Catch and release fishing had not been invented and certainly not yet advertised in Field and Stream television. Often enough I let go when the grab was not clean or the gator bigger than I wanted or thought I could handle. I never once thought, as I would now, about the gator and what a discourtesy our little game was. Most of the time we brought our prey back to put in the camp's gator pit, a four-foot high rectangular block construction, eight by ten feet, open at the top so the kids could see some live gators. There, I am afraid, when counselors were not supervising, various forms of torture were performed, poking and bombarding the helpless reptiles in this summer mini-zoo.

Now I see in that pit much wider dimensions of yearning for the muck or laying out on a big snag at the end of Rock Springs Run. When the camp session was over, I presume the gators were released back to the lake, though I never was given that chore. I have never killed a gator, but I regret now that I was party to those captures, and the older I get, the less inclined I am to enjoy any healthy wilderkind in captivity.

Of course, in the wild small gators are themselves meat for hawks and raccoons, bobcats and such, but I doubt they think it tastes a lot like chicken. I guess that if I were starving, I'd be glad to eat a tail now and then. It surprises me that in the studies of the natives' diet at Twin Mounds, little evidence appears that gator was a staple. When you consider the large amount of snails and mussels that they ate--85% of their diet--you wonder whether they filtered these critters out of

the muck from their canoes or waded into the gator's realm with scoops or sieves or some other wily contrivance. In spite of the long history of perhaps 8-10,000 years of river-dwelling humans in Florida, the gator has not evolved a taste for man-flesh. Of course, if people would regularly sleep like Bartram did, in a village of gator-nests, something could develop.

Direct apprehension of the gator, the child's immediate grasp of life, the desire to touch and to hold the strange thing in the only safe way, the playful stroking of it on its belly as it sleeps upside down, your own breath held precious inside this beginning of a greater danger, these breaches of the respect for a strange creature are not done at first as to a person, but eventually one can develop an etiquette, as Gary Snyder has put it, a set of manners in the wild.

I hate the part in the wildlife documentary where scientists shoot tranquilizers into mighty panthers or bears so they can attach a collar. No eagle would ever be tagged if you had to reach out and grab it with your bare hands.

Crossing the boundary of animal intimacy—breaking the bond of wildness—is a very delicate and important moment. More and more I sense that the hunter or fisher in these outdoor films has a genuine flash of mutual respect and dialogue with the animal, as when the tow-headed Alabaman fingers the dazzling catch, kisses it, and gently with both hands praises its color and line as the river takes it all back.

Eye to eye and hand to neck and tail, boys and girls in the muck grow up together. Even the field and stream scientist with no profession of the spiritual realm has to move through the habitat, trail the great creature, trap and tranquilize, and then hold and measure, examine with veterinarian eyes the full health and stature in order to know the population. Census and physical examination put the scientist in a unique position that can only be exceeded, in the case of the higher mammals, by the rare human who will live in the wild with the colonies of primates. The extraordinary narratives in our time and no others, supporting this acclimation of science and animal community, attest to the possibility that we will someday find ways to get a complete animal education. Meanwhile, we seem to have a brief possibility in adolescence for taking in our hands both knowledge and respect for some of the lords of the river.