

THE FLORIDA CROCODILE

CHAPTER VI

THE FLORIDA CROCODILE

ALL hands on deck, quick!" Even as I shouted, they all tumbled up, the Camera-man in his pajamas and the two boys in whatever they had on.

We were anchored beside the Madeira Hammock, at the extreme southerly end of the peninsula of Florida. A few days before, we had captured two crocodiles which I had arranged to start on their way to the Bronx the next morning. In preparation for the trip we had tied one in the bottom of the big skiff and the other, in a box ten feet by three, had been placed on top of the skiff. I had intended to tow the outfit to Planter, with the little launch, whence the reptiles could be shipped to Key West to connect with a steamer for New York. In the night there was a great commotion beside our boat, followed by much splashing, and when I rushed on deck, I found the big skiff swamped and both crocodiles struggling in the water, one tied in the capsized craft, the other navigating in a submerged box, and both headed straight for Davy Jones.

The night was one of the darkest I ever knew and I sat on the rail, with my legs overboard, clinging to a corner of the big box, trying to keep one end

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enough out of water to enable the crocodile to breathe. I was not quite certain whether it was the head or tail of the creature that I was keeping on top, although I suspected it was the latter, from the way it was splashing water over me. The boys soon got a line around the box and with the peak halyards hoisted enough of it out of water to ensure its occupant a supply of air. In the meantime the Camera-man held up the bow of the skiff, to keep the nose of the other crocodile out of water, and thereafter we rigged tackle to hoist box and skiff, with their contents, on deck.

It was morning when we finished the job and as I had changed my mind about towing, with a small launch, a skiff containing such unruly reptiles, we set sail in our cruising boat for Key West, where our captives held a reception on the dock of the Mallory Line which was attended by a large proportion of the inhabitants of that city.

Many years ago I thought that I was the original discoverer of the Florida crocodile, but found afterward so many other original discoverers that the honor wasn't big enough to go around. I learned later that the first and finest specimen ever killed was by Dr. W. T. Hornaday in 1875.

My first sight of one was when anchored in a cruising boat about a mile south of Madeira Hammock. The captain and I put out in a skiff to look for an alligator whose head had shown for an instant two hundred yards from the boat. Poling quickly to the place where we had seen him, we easily followed



The crocodile on his slide taking a sun-bath.

his trail by the roiled water. The water in the bay was of a uniform depth of four feet and happened to be unusually clear so that we soon caught sight of the reptile and thereafter it was merely a struggle to tire him down until we could get within harpooning distance. We drove the skiff with all our strength and made short cuts whenever possible. We soon discovered that it was no ordinary alligator we were following. He was more agile, his speed greater, and once we saw his pointed, knobbed nose, so different from that of the alligator which we knew so well. After an hour of exhausting effort I got a chance with the harpoon and sent the iron against his scaly back. It failed to penetrate the tough hide, but started the creature off like an express train, and we did not see him again, nor had we strength left to follow him if we had found him.

The next day we started out with the boy and Tom, the boatman, in one skiff and the captain and I in another. We rowed, sculled and poled for miles, up narrow creeks where dense vegetation compelled us to lie down in the skiffs, as we dragged them under overhanging branches, out into bayous and broad, open ponds.

In the afternoon, tired and discouraged, we were poling through a long narrow passage, between wooded banks, which connected two shallow lakes. Suddenly the whole bottom of the stream seemed to have life, and I saw under me the tail of a monster, as his body glided beneath the skiff. There was no vulnerable part within reach and no time to strike.

We turned the skiff quickly and pursued the crocodile which was heading for the boy's boat. He drove a harpoon into the body of the reptile and his boat was towed rapidly behind the great creature until his harpoon pulled out. We poled past his skiff and were soon within striking distance of the saurian, which I hit in the side with my harpoon. He towed us at high speed to about the middle of the stream where it broadened out and where there was a deep hole. As he stopped here for a moment, we passed him and I called to the boy to guard his end of the channel, resolving never to allow the reptile to leave that creek alive.

I was fearful that the one iron might draw out and decided to put no more strain upon it, but to use it only to keep track of the creature and to make fast another harpoon as soon as possible.

We pushed carefully over the hole where we knew he was hidden and peered under and through the overhanging bushes. At length I saw him directly under me and sent a Lily iron with such force against his broad back that the iron bent up into the form of a ring. The crocodile tore down the creek like a tempest and was met by a keen whale iron from the hand of the boy. Back he rushed, to receive another harpoon from me which only served to turn him around. Again he was checked by the other skiff, this time by a harpoon thrown by Tom, which broke on one of the creature's scales. The crocodile again took refuge in the deep hole and we rested.

I remembered that on the day previous, the cap-



Coming out of his cave.

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tain had laughed when I failed to drive a harpoon through the hide of a crocodile and I invited him to take a shot at this particular saurian, which was now at rest and could be distinctly seen. The captain smiled as he straightened up his tall form and put forth his great strength, and it seemed to me that iron and pole were both going clear through the reptile. Yet when the harpoon rebounded and the crocodile dashed down the channel, I was quite as well pleased as if the throw had been successful. Back, unhurt, from the boy's boat again came the creature and received another iron from ours. Once more he swam to the other skiff and back. This time, unmindful of a blow from my harpoon, he swam past us and made for the end of the creek and the open bay beyond it. Just as he reached this I planted in his body a harpoon that held. I now felt sure of the quarry and shouted for the boy to come.

His skiff came flying down the stream, Tom with his hat gone and both poling like mad, for fear of losing some of the fun. As they reached the reptile the boy again struck him, but the patience of the crocodile had been quite worn out.

Rising to the surface and opening his great mouth to its fullest extent, the monster dashed upon the skiff and took the side of the boat between his huge jaws. The breaking out of a piece of the gunwale caused his upper jaw to slip and saved the skiff from instant destruction. I attacked the reptile with a harpoon and he turned upon our skiff with open mouth, and as I repelled him with my harpoon pole

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he bit it in three pieces. Tom pulled for the bushes and announced that he had had enough, nor could he be induced to come out.

We took the boy in our skiff and tried to get a noose over the head of the crocodile. We worried the monster into attacking us and then kept him off with oars while we tried to throw a rope over his head. This occupation began to seem extra-hazardous and when the captain suggested that the contract was too big for us, I agreed with him. I had hoped to ship the crocodile alive to Central Park as a companion to a bear which I had recently sent there, but concluded to compromise on a mounted specimen for a museum I wotted of.

After shooting him the transportation problem presented itself, for we were many miles from our cruising boat, where we had to carry him to properly prepare the hide for mounting. We tore the seats out of one of the skiffs, sunk it in the water, dragged the body of the reptile over it and stood in water up to our necks and lifted while the boy sat on the crocodile and bailed. Then all hands got in the boy's skiff, which had been seriously injured by the crocodile, and paddling and poling, as we towed the boat which carried him, we reached our cruising boat late in the night. The reptile was fourteen feet two inches long and we had struck him seventeen times with harpoons.

We spent many days exploring the water-ways lying between Barnes Sound and the Everglades, finding no alligators but many crocodiles. We followed the



Taking the crocodile into the skiff.



Caught in a turtle net.

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trail left by their dragging tails in shallow waters and traced their course by the roiled water of the deeper channels. Sometimes we caught sight of their heads on the surface of a lake and occasionally traced them through the odor of musk which they gave out.

The Florida crocodile is nearly extinct. The few left, excepting those in captivity, are probably confined to a narrow strip of the extreme southern end of the Florida peninsula. The crocodile is active in defending himself when attacked, but when seized and his jaws tied, becomes as gentle as a lamb. I have often captured specimens nine or ten feet long, and after tying their jaws together with a handkerchief and taking them into the skiff, have sat upon their backs for hours while I hunted for their mates. Whenever I have tried this experiment on an alligator I have had to swim. The crocodile usually runs some distance when disturbed, but the alligator is given to hiding in the mud and playing possum.

In the old days my excuse for killing crocodiles was that museums and colleges desired mounted specimens of the creatures. While I have continued to pursue them, partly for the excitement of the chase, and seek to capture them alive for the camera, or for some great public educational institution like the New York Zoo, I no longer kill them, excepting by accident, of which mischances we have had several.

On one occasion we followed in a skiff a little creek running into the Madeira Hammock, which was so overgrown and closed overhead by interlocking branches and intertwined vines that we had to clear a

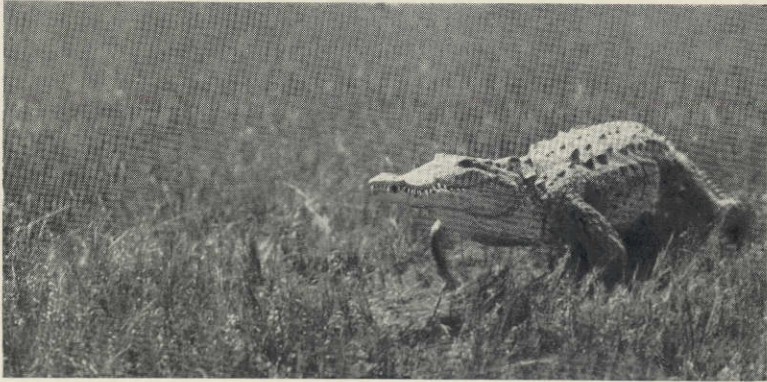
path with hatchet and knife. It seemed to have escaped observation, for it showed no trace of previous hunter or explorer and it ended in a small landlocked bay to which it was the only outlet. As we entered the bay a slight odor of musk told us that one of the reptiles was near, while a splash at the other end of the bay spoke of another which had just slid from his bed into the water.

We spent some hours vainly trying to locate the creatures and then, believing they would leave the bay where they had been alarmed, we stretched a net across the creek by which we had entered, and went back to our cruising boat, which was a mile off shore, to get food and other comforts while we watched the net, during the siege we proposed. As we reached the boat a storm burst upon us, one skiff was carried away and by the time we had recovered it, the gale was so fierce that it seemed unwise to leave the big boat. Some hours later, when a slight abatement of the storm made it practicable to handle the skiff, we returned to our net to find in it two crocodiles, one of nearly eleven feet and the other of nine feet in length, both of them dead. In the little time of our absence they had drowned.

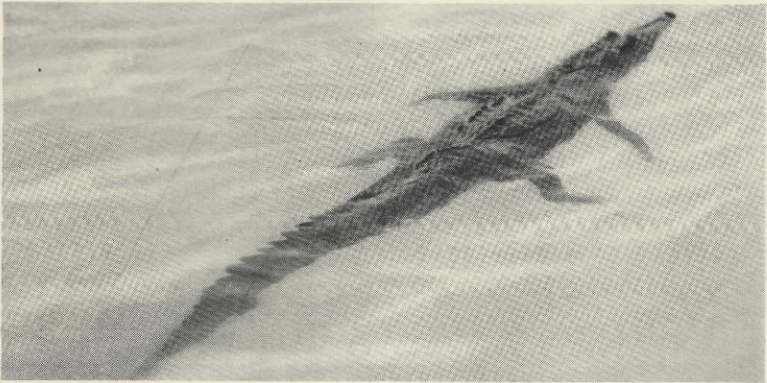
The next time we set the net we didn't take our eyes off of it, and when some of the corks began to bob under the surface started for it and before the crocodile knew that he was in trouble we had him tightly wound up in the net and aboard the skiff. We had one or two little scimmages with him while unwrapping him, getting a line around his body and



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(1) Jumping at the camera-man. (2) Awkward navigation.
(3) Homeward bound.

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chucking him overboard to look after himself until he was wanted.

Some days later we took him to a high and dry key where he posed for the Camera-man, and then, as he was less than nine feet long and not eligible for the Zoo, we walked beside him to the bank down which he slid gracefully into the water, the Camera-man taking a final shot at him as he started on his homeward voyage.

We caught a baby crocodile about five feet long which, by the time we were through photographing him, had become quite a pet, and our hunter-boy wanted to take him home to show to his friends in Everglade. We permitted this with the understanding that we would bring him back to his own country on our next visit. We gave the creature the freedom of the deck, with only a string to his leg to fetch him back when he slipped overboard. He was a well-mannered infant, but I often wondered that he didn't bite off a few of the toes of the barefoot boy that stood beside him and tried to make him eat things that he didn't want.

The boy did make him eat the food he offered him, for he took the baby in his arms, held open his jaws and put oysters, clams and pieces of fish down his throat and then held his mouth closed until he swallowed them. One night the mercury ran way down in the thermometer and in the morning the little crocodile was stiff with the cold. His nurse rubbed him, massaged him and gave him a warm bath, but the baby died and the hunter-boy grieved for days.

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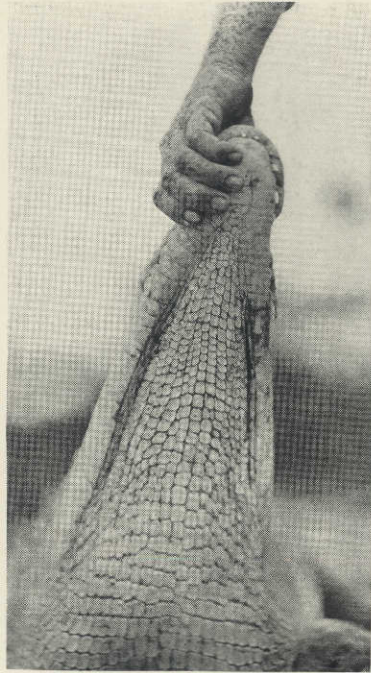
While exploring in a skiff the system of shallow bays that lie to the east of Cape Sable, hoping to find a channel leading through to White Water Bay on the west coast, the hunter-boy landed for a tramp of a few miles through the woods to the north. I remained with the skiff on the shore of a large bay, and carefully studied its surface through a field glass. Several times the head of a large crocodile appeared, about five hundred yards out in the bay and directly in line with a tall palmetto on the opposite shore. When the hunter-boy returned I stood in the bow of my skiff with my harpoon, while he poled it toward the palmetto.

As we neared the place where the crocodile had appeared our motion was scarcely perceptible, until at last I saw beneath my hand the creature we sought. I thrust the point of the harpoon through the skin of his foreleg and after the crocodile had towed us half a mile he came up beside the skiff with jaws wide open. It was the work of a few minutes only to tie them together, pull out the harpoon and drag him over the gunwale, although we nearly swamped the skiff in doing it.

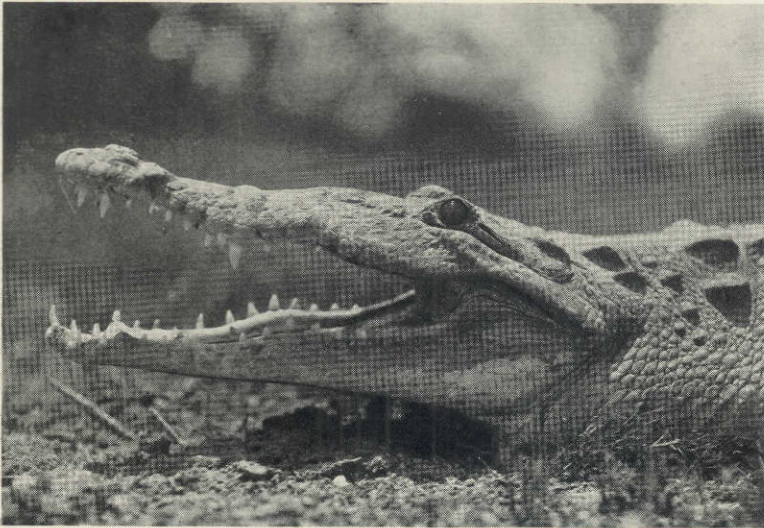
While the crocodile is more shy he is less savage than the alligator. After the Camera-man had spent an hour with one which we had turned loose upon an open prairie, the reptile was almost friendly. If he failed to "look pleasant" for the Camera-man our hunter-boy, although only about half his length, seldom hesitated to walk up to him and hold his jaws wide open. His advance upon an alligator was



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THE HEAD OF THE CROCODILE

(1) Top view showing the lower teeth projecting through upper jaw. (2) Lower jaw and throat. (3) Head in action (camera within four feet).

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more cautious and he wanted the protection of a big stick.

In hunting crocodiles you can take your best girl along. There is plenty of excitement, but nothing to really alarm her. She soon learns to recognize the signs of the reptile's presence and her eye is often quick to discern the disappearing black speck in the distance that serves to locate him. It is not always wise to take him too suddenly into the skiff with her unless her experience with mice has been exceptional.

To photograph the uncaptured crocodile in his native haunts requires patience, patience, and more patience. You must seal up your guns, locate yourself near his residence, and if your ways are gentle and you have the wisdom of the serpent, you may convince him that you also possess the harmlessness of the dove. On your first approach to his home he will glide from his bed on the bank to the bottom of the channel at the first sound of your distant paddle. Then day by day he will grow careless, until some bright noon you will catch him asleep on his bed or get a snapshot with your camera at his head as he slowly sinks back into his cave.

The best way to capture crocodiles unharmed is in their caves. On one occasion we found the trail of a large crocodile leading to a hole in a bank at the border of Barnes Sound. I held a noosed rope over the entrance to the cave while the Camera-man explored it with a long and flexible pole. He worried the reptile until a head appeared, with widely-opened jaws, over which I promptly cast the noose

and we dragged the creature out and turned him loose upon a prairie to be photographed.

We then tied him with a long line to a tree, giving him freedom of land and water until he should be wanted for the Bronx, but he proved to be an ingrate who wound his restraining line about a convenient snag, broke it and decamped.

In another case, when we had traced a crocodile to his cave, we hung a net before it and probed the ground behind it with sharpened sticks until it came out. This specimen was too active for us and had fairly escaped when one of our boys grabbed him by the nose and held his jaws closed until they could be tied. This is a dangerous thing to do with a crocodile, because his upper canine teeth, unlike those of the alligator, project past or through the upper jaw and tear the hand of the careless hunter.

The failure of this crocodile to make good his escape was the turning point in his career, the tide "which taken at its flood leads on to fortune," for it resulted in his transfer from ignoble associations and a climate that had proved deadly to his race, to the aristocratic atmosphere of the Bronx.