

THE PASSING OF THE FLORIDA
ALLIGATOR

CHAPTER VIII

THE PASSING OF THE FLORIDA ALLIGATOR

THE alligator has always been the picturesque and popular feature of the peninsula of Florida. He enlivened its waters, made his bed on the banks of its streams and, seconded by flocks of snowy heron and other birds of beauty and grace which burdened the trees and filled the air, started the tide of travel that sends fifty thousand tourists to the coast and rivers of Florida each year.

The plumes of the egrets adorn the hats of the women, the tourist has murdered the birds that beckoned him; therefore, to the few surviving alligators attaches the credit of creating a northern state on the border of the tropics. This creature has served as a target for nearly every rifle that was ever brought into the state and deserves a better fate than extinction. It is under ordinary conditions practically harmless, and I have never known it to attack anyone, nor have I ever heard of an authentic case of its doing so. If wounded, or surprised in its lair and cornered, it would no doubt put up a stiff fight and become dangerous, but generally speaking is as harmless as a Florida cow, nay even more so, for the Florida cow has been known to kill people.

Sportsmen and tourists have done what evil they could, but the deadly foe of the alligator, the implement that has nearly compassed his extinction and driven him from every river and lake on the coast, is the bull's-eye lantern. Its glare hypnotizes and holds helpless the reptile as the gleaming eye of the snake is reputed to fascinate (but probably doesn't) the fluttering bird. Fire-hunting for alligators is a business, is butchery—bloody and revolting. Yet the sportsman's first fire-hunt with firearms—and it should be his last—is all romance and thrill, until the last bloody act. I first bound the bull's-eye upon my own forehead when in camp beside an inland salt water lake in South Florida. Because of lack of padding or a skull too thin the lantern bruised my head and blistered my brains, but the pictures painted that night remain bright in my memory. I crouched in the bow with my rifle beside me as the captain sculled the skiff across the end of the lake and into a narrow creek, the mouth of which was hidden by bushes. We cut away tangles of vines and dragged the skiff under branches and over roots, lighted only by the single beam from the lamp on my forehead. As we emerged into a small open pond a loud *Whoo-hoo-hoo* from the thick foliage over my head was answered from out of the darkness across the pond. The silence that followed was broken a minute later by the distant cry of a panther. The skiff was motionless, and as I let the beam of light from the lantern stray over the calm surface of the lake and play among the roots of the mangroves on its



Fire-hunting is the deadliest of the methods of pursuing these saurian.

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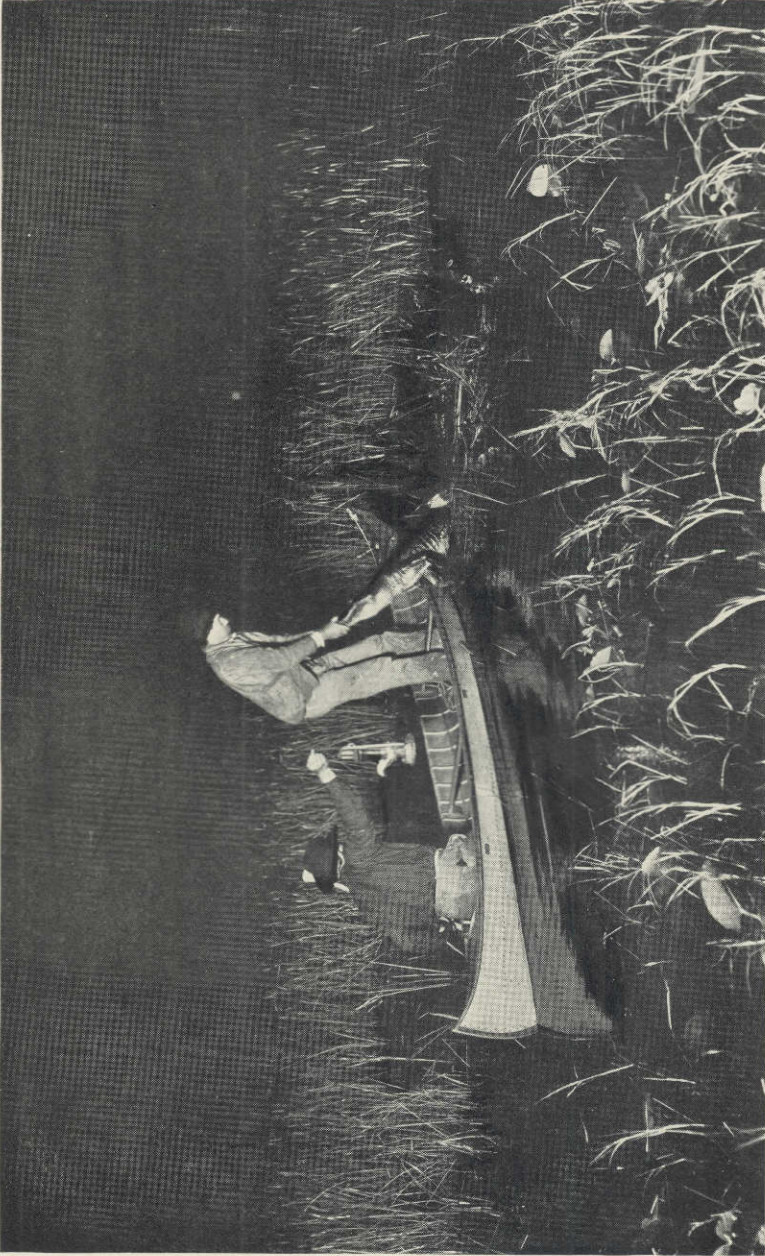
border, I saw a reptile in each lump of mud and twisted tree trunk. Then, as the skiff glided silently along the shore, the soft step of a wildcat, the squabbling of coons and the sudden flight of startled birds got on my nerves; the solid blackness outside of the tiny searchlight was peopled with strange wild creatures and when a frightened frog splashed in the water beside us, the circle of light from my lantern flashed to the tree tops, and the captain behind me chuckled. I asked him in a whisper if he had seen any alligators. "Plenty, the lake's full of 'em; just run over one," he replied, adding with gentle sarcasm: "'gators don't climb trees."

For the next few minutes I took lessons in fire-hunting and learned to recognize the dull red reflected gleam from the reptile's eye and to judge of his size, when both eyes showed, from their distance apart. I steadied the light on a pair of widely separated eyes that seemed to float far out from shore. As the skiff moved toward them I could trace the outlines of the head and back of a large alligator floating on the surface. As I was lifting my rifle the captain whispered, "Not yet," and again, "Not yet," until, when at length I fired, I took no aim but held my weapon so near the creature's head that the powder must have burned him as the bullet smashed his skull. Since that night I have often fire-hunted with a camera but never with firearms.

A score of years ago the water in the Big Cypress country was filled with alligators and it was not uncommon for fire-hunters to take a thousand of the rep-

tiles from a single small lake. I once photographed a portion of a circular pond, one hundred yards in diameter, enclosed in a cypress strand and the print showed seventy-three alligators floating or swimming upon the surface of the water. While exploring the country north of Cape Sable I camped one night with my guide on the border of a lake of mingled mud and water stirred by small tarpon and other fish and reptiles to the consistency of porridge. The water that I ate failed to satisfy me, and the mosquitoes drove me early under my bar, hungry and thirsty. The step of a bear near our bars woke us up in the early evening and we crawled out with our rifles in the light of a moon that was nearly full. We crawled back pretty quick, my guide having stepped on a cactus and I having been attacked by a solid mass of mosquitoes, so savage that they frightened me. As I couldn't sleep I asked my guide to tell me what he knew of the lake beside which we were camped.

"You know my old partner," said he, "Will Stevens, the feller that was shot at Naples, he went guidin' for you once? Well him and me took 'leven hundred 'gators out o' that pond one year and we skinned most on 'em on that little island you saw there. We packed pieces of dry goods boxes from Low's place at the Cape and made a boat. I reckon I'll find it in the morning, 'taint likely anybody's bothered with it. Pond was jest the way you see it now, gar fish stickin' up their noses all over it, little tarpon rollin' and jumpin', only the 'gators was thick



Taking the victim aboard.

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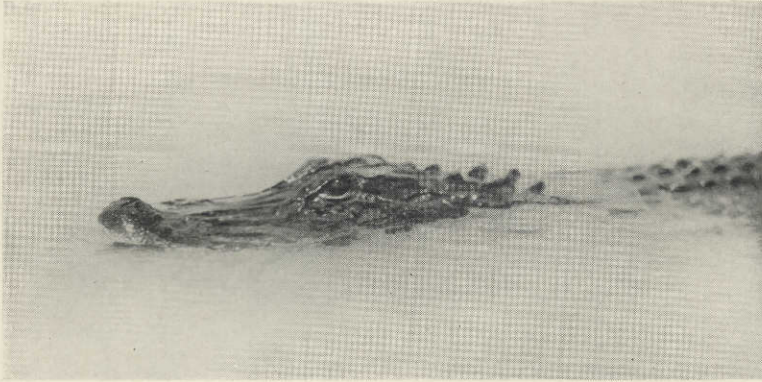
and when I first see it I jest got behind a bush and grunted and I'll bet I could hav' walked clean to that island without steppin' off 'n their backs. First off we didn't need a light to shoot 'em, but after we'd thinned 'em down a bit we used to shoot 'em at night, 'bout all we could skin next day. One day when we was skinnin' on the island, somehow the boat got away and drifted ashore. Will said he'd swim fer it providin' I'd stand by with the rifle and keep off the 'gators. Well, when he got most ashore I began to shoot all 'round him and hollered to him to swim fast, thet the 'gators was after him. He most busted hisself gettin' to shore and I near died laffin', but he jest walked off an' left me alone on thet island with a lot o' stinkin carcasses 'till most night the nex' day. I ain't usually 'fraid o' 'gators and would hev swum ashore, but this time they was too damn thick and I reckon I must hev scared myself when I frightened my partner."

Notwithstanding the great slaughter of alligators the crop held out for many years and as recently as 1898 the principal dealer on the west coast of Florida bought three or four hundred hides daily from about fifty hunters and kept a schooner running to Key West with hides and returning with cargoes of salt, ammunition and grub. The price paid alligator hunters for hides varies from one dollar for those measuring seven feet, or over, down to ten cents for such as measure less than four feet in length.

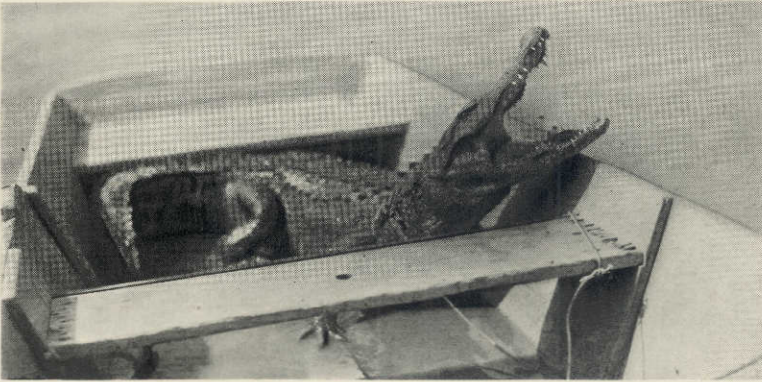
Fire-hunting is so deadly that after a hunter has swept the surface of a river with his light it is scarcely

worth while to look for alligators in that stream. The fire-hunter has so nearly wiped out the saurian inhabitants of the rivers and lakes of the coast that their pursuit no longer affords him a living. Yet whatever the work to which the hunter turns for support, he always stands guard against the return of the alligator. Last year I used to visit a colony of five alligators which I found at Clam Slough on the west coast near Marco. One evening a Marco boy was told that 'gators had been seen at Clam Slough. "I'll go down to-night and git 'em," said he. I said nothing. My alligators were doomed. I could have saved them this time but the next native who heard of them would have gathered them in. The boy sculled a leaky little canoe that wouldn't safely hold two people out the big pass into the Gulf of Mexico on a moonless night, down the coast to Clam Slough where he found and killed the five 'gators. He loaded his canoe to the gunwales with the carcasses and I saw him at the Marco store the next day swapping five alligator hides for three dollar's worth of ammunition, tobacco and grits.

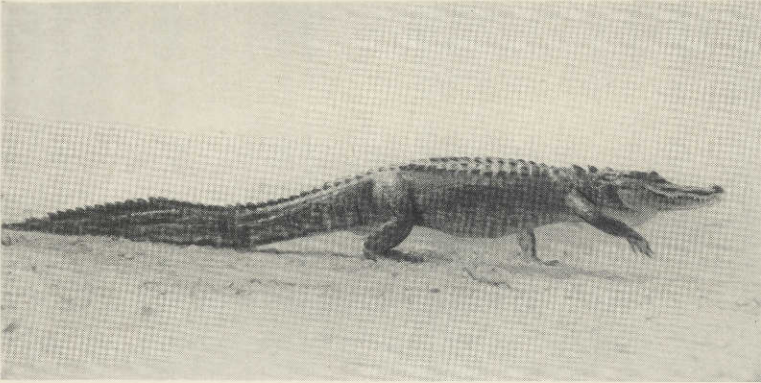
The small remnant of the reptiles has been driven to its last refuge, its caves in the Big Cypress and the Everglades, where they are followed by a few hunters armed with iron rods, hooks and axes, as neither rifle nor lantern is required in their work. In the dry season the water of the swamps and prairies recedes, leaving little shallow ponds and water holes dug by the alligators, from which they are hauled with hooks and knocked in the head by the hunters.



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(1) Two dots on the surface indicate a 'gator. (2) It is wise to let him have his end of the boat. (3) "Good-bye, I'm going home!"

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These ponds and holes are filled with venomous snakes and it is the belief of hunters that as the alligators are killed off the moccasins increase. Sometimes thirty or forty of these poisonous snakes can be seen about a single alligator cave. If the hunter happens to wear boots he kicks the moccasins out of his way with the contempt which familiarity breeds. But even the hunter, when he hears the jarring of rattles, climbs a tree till he has located the king of snakes. Many hunters carry hypodermic syringes and permanganate of potassium, but few have faith in the drug as an antidote, and all have grewsome stories to tell of the effects of the venom secreted by the snakes.

The alligators killed at such hazard are skinned, the hides salted and carried over bad trails and through swamps on the backs of hunters, and then poled in canoes many miles to the store of a trader, where they are sold for an average of less than seventy cents each. It is for this pittance, to a few of her citizens, that Florida permits the destruction of an attraction and an asset worth millions to the state.

The casual cruiser on the west coast of Florida with the usual brass band methods, who explores a river in a day and explores his way through its branches in another, will find the banks bare and the waters barren of alligators, but the camera-man, possessed of the patience of the hunter and the persistence of the naturalist, may even yet obtain the saurian subjects his camera calls for. There are boys on the coast, born with much knowledge of the

alligator and his ways, who will go out with him to the haunts of the reptile on the prairies and in the swamps, will follow a trail to a marshy pond and coax a 'gator to the surface by grunting in his own tongue.

I have seen a barefoot boy, when the reptile refused to respond to his call, wade in the mud to his waist, explore with his toes till he felt the wiggle of the 'gator beneath them, then worry him to the surface, grab him by the nose before he could open his jaws and tow the creature ashore to be photographed. When an alligator that we were hunting crawled into his cave, I held a noosed rope over its mouth while the boy poked a stick through the mud until it hit the creature in his hiding place and soon I had him snared, ready to be dragged out on the prairie and tied, to be kept till the Camera-man was ready for him. Then we turned the reptile loose on a bit of prairie, and the boy and I, armed with sticks, headed him off when he tried to escape, while the Camera-man, with his head in the hood of his instrument, followed the creature about seeking for evidence in the case of "Reason *vs.* Instinct." When the Camera-man was through with him the alligator was set free, a final shot being taken at him as he walked off. Our hunter-boys could never be made to comprehend our reasons for restoring to the creatures their freedom. They understood the photographing, but when this was done why not collect a dollar for the reptile's hide? Their manner implied that to this question no sane answer was pos-

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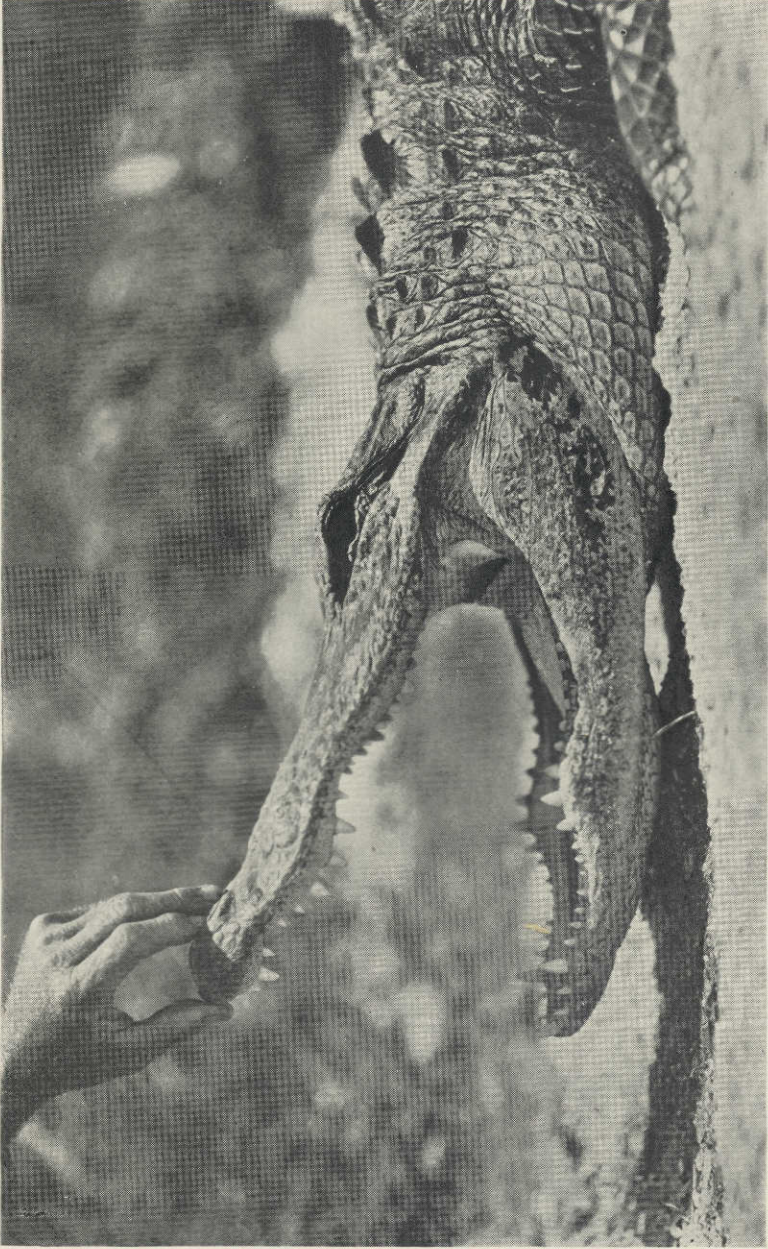
sible. In the open waters of the rivers and the Everglades we used a tiny harpoon, stopped down so that it could only penetrate an inch beyond the barb and inflict but a trifling wound. We put little strain on the harpoon line, the purpose of which was to enable us to follow the creature until we could get a rope around his nose. Sometimes while paddling in a stream, the odor of musk told of the presence of an alligator and scrutiny of the bottom disclosed the reptile near, or under, the boat. Then a noose, made of the end of the painter, was slipped under the nose of the alligator and after a brief struggle the creature was hauled aboard. After a few hours of captivity almost anything could be done with the reptile, although we were always shy of the unfettered jaws of a big one. Our hunter-boy would stand in front of a large alligator and hold his mouth open for the Camera-man, but he was an exceedingly active youth and never failed to jump a little quicker than the reptile. These alligators often played possum with us and allowed themselves to be tied in a skiff without a kick when we wished to tow them to some place convenient for the work of the Camera-man. But they were always on the lookout for a chance to make trouble and once when we were quietly sailing down a river, towing a skiff in which we had tied a 'gator, the creature thought we had forgotten him and breaking one of the lines which held him, bit a piece out of the skiff, capsized it and rolled over and over with it in the water. We lowered our sails and worked frantically to straighten out the tangle before

the reptile could drown. Meanwhile wind and tide swept us into the mangroves, which laid hold of spars and rigging and held us fast where myriads of mosquitoes assembled to drain us of our blood.

For the Nature-student the habits of the alligator hold much interest; to the camera-sportsman he presents delightful possibilities; while to the everyday tourist who will really seek him in his home, he will give an assortment of sensations more thrilling than could be unearthed in a year of ordinary globe-trotting.

Hunt up the haunts of the creature until you find a river that he frequents. Paddle quietly, and alone, down the stream and up the creeks and branches that enter it, till you find on the bank the bed of an alligator with signs of his recent presence. Hide your skiff, sit down on the bed and wait for him to come home. By and by, out in the middle of the stream, you may see three little black dots, the nose and eyes of your absentee landlord, and soon the whole head, tail and back may appear. He will swim slowly toward you and probably sink gradually beneath the surface before reaching the bank. If he comes on and crawls up on the bank beside you it will be a high tribute to your coolness and complete control of your nerves, and the incident will make a pleasant place in your memory.

It happened once to me that after sitting silently in my skiff for half an hour wondering why an alligator I had seen didn't show up, I chanced to look down and saw his head resting quietly on the surface



An angry nine-foot alligator posing for his picture.

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of the water within twelve inches of my hand as it lay on the gunwale. It gives a sensation to be remembered to sit thus, motionless, watching the unwinking eyes of this free, wild, powerful brute fixed gravely on your face, the huge jaws and the little that shows of the long white teeth within reach of your hand and your hand within reach of jaws and teeth. Of course if you have the mediæval instincts of some sportsmen you may slowly, so slowly, reach for the weapon beside you and send a steel-jacketed cylinder through the brute brain and a couple of days later watch a bloated carcass floating high on its way to the Gulf, giving off an odor appropriate to the incident.

It is up to those of us who claim to be Nature-lovers to look after the Florida alligator. We have just organized a society to weep at the bier of the bison, a creature which has been dead so long that he can be spoken of as was Lazarus, and have promoted clubs without number which pester Congress and the States to prevent by law the killing of game birds and beasts for food, that we may kill more of them for fun. We are working, almost without hope, for birds that are nearly extinct and animals which have been banished from their environments by the requirements of Civilization, but we are neglecting a creature whose existence is imperiled, although his habitat is secure, his sustenance not threatened, and he only needs to be let alone to restore life and attractiveness to the waterways of a great national playground.

