

Team Sport

Alligator hunting brings friends and families together to create traditions, trophies, and memories

By Ricky Flynt





Most alligator hunters are not new to hunting and fishing; in fact, they typically have decades of outdoor experience. But alligator hunting is unique in that it is the closest thing there is to a team sport in hunting.

One person can harvest a deer, turkey, duck, or fish. It would be incredibly difficult to successfully bag an alligator alone. It is a group experience and requires teamwork. And from far away as California and Canada, preschoolers and octogenarians, husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, grandfathers and grandmothers, and friends and co-workers have teamed up to share the adventure of hunting alligators in the swamps and bayous of Mississippi.

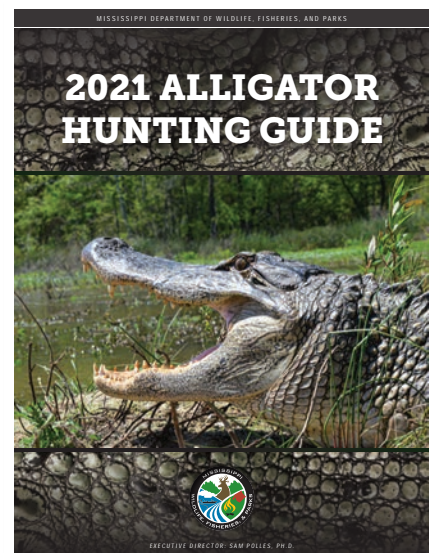
Compared to traditional game seasons, alligator hunting is still a relatively new opportunity in the state, but it has quickly risen in popularity. Through 17 years of expansion, two things have remained constant: growing interest and a growing group of passionate hunters.

Thirst for information

Newcomers often bring predisposed ideas about what to expect from alligator hunting in Mississippi. These ideas usually are derived from something they saw on cable television, YouTube, or elsewhere on the Internet. However, to really understand alligator hunting, one needs to go to the proper sources.

Alligator Hunting Guide: Hunters will get this Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks (MDWFP) guide as part of a packet included with the draw permit. The guide contains some of the most vital information a hunter needs to know, including special regulations and requirements. It also addresses everything from basic alligator biology and history in Mississippi to legal equipment, capture methods, dispatch techniques, mandatory tagging and harvest reporting, skinning, and processing.

Alligator Training Course: More than 5,000 people completed MDWFP's alligator training course between 2005-2012, and many described it as a vital in-



fluence for promoting safe and successful hunting. The course is now available as a complete series of videos at mdwfp.com/alligator.

Social media: The Mississippi Alligator Hunters Facebook Page (MAHFP) was launched by Wade Robinson of Brandon and Brad Baugh of Boyle in 2010, and has grown to more than 3,300 members. The page allows a network of like-minded hunters to share information about

Getting Creative

Alligator hunters are finding ways to preserve their memories with items constructed from alligator hides, teeth, claws, and osteoderms (the boney protective plates on the back of an alligator). A tanned alligator hide is one of the most durable and beautiful animal products in the world. Typical creations from tanned hides include, boots, belts, wallets, gun holsters, knife scabbards, key chains, and jewelry. Hunters also are using hides and bones for picture frames, letter openers, bow ties, book covers, gun slings, and more.

Knife / Shannon Cooper; turkey call / Drew Holleman; wallets / Chris Winter; jewelry / Brad Baugh; rifle sling / Drew Holliman



techniques, equipment, safety items, regulation updates, photos, processing, and trophy ideas. The page is recognized as a beneficial resource through its promotion of safety, legal methods, regulation changes, drawing procedures, and proper care and use of the resources. It has created a camaraderie among alligator hunters, unlike any other hunting interest group.

Passion for the sport

Alligator hunting requires several people and a substantial amount of gear and equipment. Often a hunting party can get so big that it will need multiple boats. Every licensed hunter over 16 years old within the group can participate in any part of the hunting experience, which includes casting at alligators, placing snares on an alligator, or dispatching the alligator. (Incidentally, because most will have a vessel loaded at, or near, capacity as they try to navigate through underwater structures, various channels, and vegetation in the dark, it is strongly advised that all hunters be aware of boating precautions and regulations.)

Working together toward a common achievement always encourages camaraderie. Here are a few traditions, memories, and testimonials shared by Mississippi alligator hunters:

- Baugh always has peanut M&Ms and soft drinks on board while hunting.
- Tom Grant of Boyle keeps Oreos on board, and the entire team partakes of them following a successful capture.
- “Our boat never leaves the ramp without a supply of Gator Goobers (Cajun-style boiled peanuts),” said Tina Brooks of Philadelphia.
- Brad and Debi Martin of Vicksburg always eat peanut M&Ms and listen to AC/DC’s “Thunderstruck” (“really loud”) on the way to the boat ramp.
- Jimmy Greer of Gluckstadt proposed

to Elizabeth Ratcliff Greer one night during a family-filled gator hunt.

- Ashley Harris of Canton said, “There is nothing I enjoy more than alligator hunting with my son and wife. It’s a family event that we anticipate all year long. We are hooked.”
- Drew Holliman of Hernando said, “Every hunt is a unique experience, from successfully landing a giant alligator to witnessing a magnificent sunrise after a long night on the water. And now, having had the opportunity to share the experience with my 11-year-old daughter and watch the excitement of her battling a 6-foot alligator on the rod and reel for over an hour all

by herself ... that’s an experience and memory we can share for a lifetime.”

Certainly there are memories and traditions shared by turkey hunters, waterfowl hunters, and deer hunters. But the experience of alligator hunting does not include being absolutely quiet, wearing camouflage, or drenching oneself in a special scent. It has grown in popularity largely because of the social experience comprised of equal parts feast and festival. The American alligator is a true wildlife conservation success story – that now allows young and old to create their own lifelong stories.

Ricky Flynt is the Alligator/Furbearer Program Coordinator for MDWFP.

