

NEIGHBOR OR NUISANCE PEST?

Article and Photography By Ricky Flynt

Alligators are ancient reptiles that have been a part of the Mississippi landscape long before indigenous tribes and European settlers entered and settled in the Southeast.

Fossil records tell us that alligators have always existed in Mississippi. In the early 1500s Spanish explorer Hernando DeSoto gives us our first historic account of these often big reptiles. He described them inhabiting what is now coastal Mississippi. Much later, General Ulysses S. Grant pointed out in 1863 the problem of navigating his troops among the numerous "moccasins and alligators" during the battle of Vicksburg.

Today, alligators occur statewide and are numerous in many counties. But, this has not always been the case. The

alligator's situation was much different 30-40 years ago in Mississippi and across its range.

The American alligator, *Alligator mississippiensis*, is found only in the United States. During the 1960s, it was on the brink of extinction. In 1968 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service placed it on the Endangered Species List.

Due to the value of the animal's hide as a commodity and other parts for souvenirs, the alligator was hunted at uncontrolled and dangerous levels. Once under federal protection, populations quickly rebounded. In fact, in 1987

ment of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks (DWFP) in the late 1960s and '70s."

One of those instrumental in the recovery of alligators in Mississippi is wildlife biologist Don Lewis of Brookhaven. Now retired from the DWFP, Lewis enjoyed working with alligators. He spent years studying, capturing and relocating them, as well as educating others about alligators.

"From about 1975-77, several hundred alligators were captured at Rockefeller Refuge and Sabine National Wildlife Refuge in southwest Louisiana and relocated to Mississippi," Lewis explained. "Most of them were literally caught by hand at night from air-boats and johnboats and transported by the trailer-load to Mississippi." Once the alligators were in Mississippi, conservation officers released them in suitable habitat across the state.

The response was a success. Alligators quickly bred and repopulated areas where they had not been seen in 30 years. Today, alligators are found throughout the state, but mainly south of U.S. 82.

The vast majority are found in the counties along the Gulf Coast and in the Ross Barnett Reservoir and associated Pearl River drainage along the Rankin-Madison County line. Jackson County is home to about 24 percent of the state's total alligator population. Hancock County has about 12 percent, while Rankin and Madison counties share about 8 percent.

Many people in Mississippi and in the South believe alligators are mythical creatures. They only exist in Hollywood portrayals of boggy, Spanish moss-covered swamps where few humans dare go.

Many Mississippians are also not aware of the state's alligator program. In fact, this program is due at least in part to the increased numbers of the reptile across the state.

According to surveys conducted in 2000, the number of alligators statewide is upwards of 38,000. Officials say those numbers have

increased since the original survey work was completed.

The fact may be shocking to some people that so many alligators are located here in Mississippi. But our numbers are minuscule compared to say Florida with its estimated population of more than one million.

Satellite imagery shows us that only about 456,000 acres in Mississippi are described as suitable habitat for alligators, which is only about 1.5 percent of the state's available land area. But that's not to say that alligators are not found in areas that may not be classified as suitable alligator habitat.

In fact, alligators are found all over the state in areas that do not provide adequate year-round habitat. Alligators are also found in areas where they did not occur 20-30 years ago.

In 1989, shortly after the status of the alligator was changed from endangered to TSA, the Mississippi Legislature approved legislation giving the Mississippi Commission on Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks authority to regulate and manage alligators in Mississippi.

Later that year, the Commission adopted Public Notice 2884 creating the Mississippi Alligator Management & Control Program. It would assume the responsibilities for regulations governing the harvest and sale of alligators.

Amended twice since 1989, the public notice gives the DWFP the authority to protect the alligator population within the state. And it has the flexibility to control nuisance alligators.

It also provides monitoring and regulations for commercial alligator ranches. Currently six of these facilities operate in the Magnolia State.

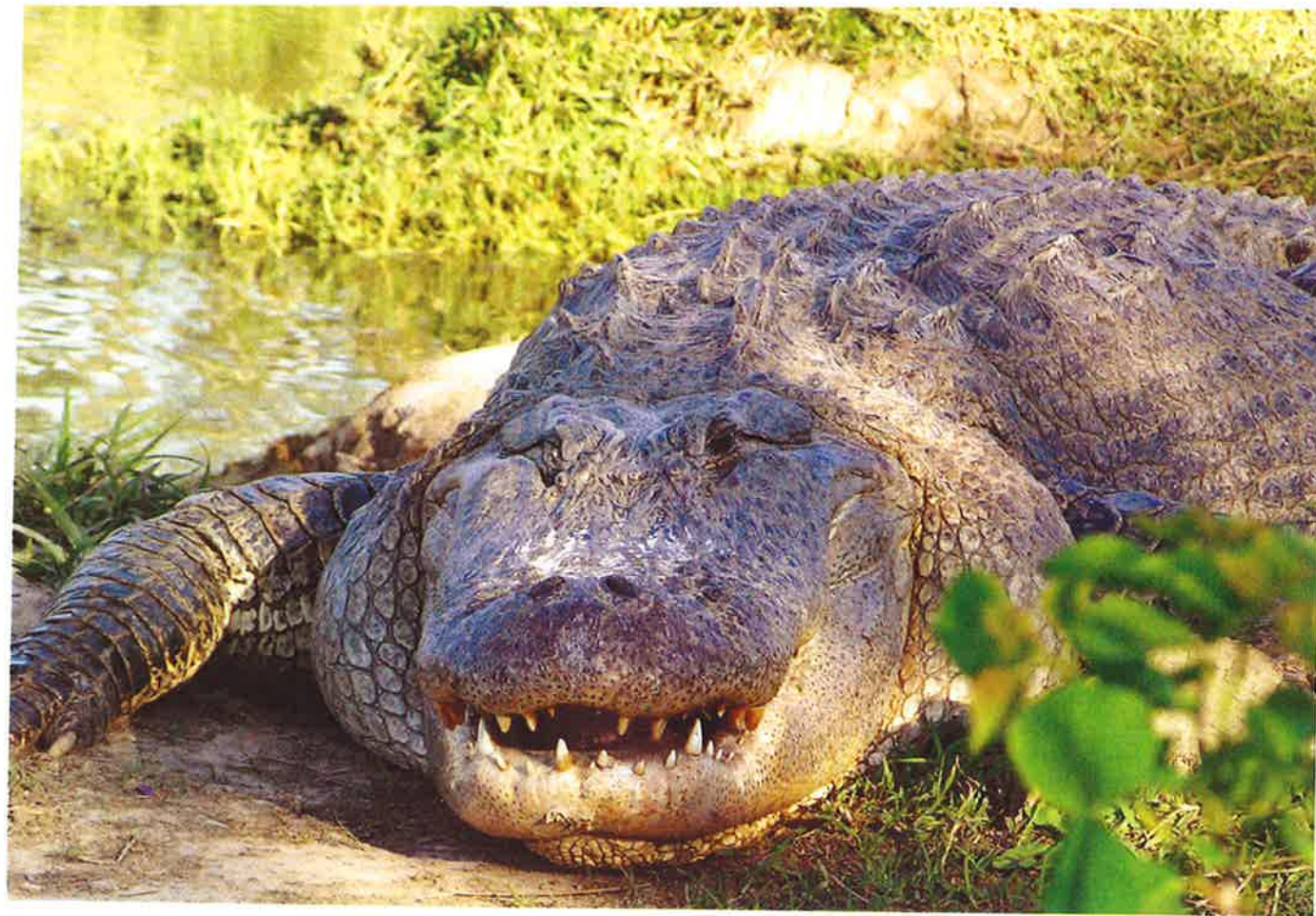
Alligator survey counts were initiated in Mississippi once the species was listed as endangered. The alligator program continues annual monitoring of the animal through its 15 routes in 13 counties, totaling over 317 miles of habitat.

Of course, most surveys are con-

the status of the alligator was changed to Threatened Due to Similarity of Appearance (TSA).

"The comeback of the alligator, along with the wood duck and the white-tailed deer, is one of the great conservation stories of our time," Wildlife Division Chief Larry Castle said.

"These animals have rebounded to record numbers. This has been due in part to efforts by state, federal, and private organizations, along with a lot of hard work from biologists and conservation officers with the Depart-



This large alligator weighed several hundred pounds. Gators this size can become a real problem in areas where people illegally or unintentionally feed alligators so that they lose their fear of humans.

ducted along the state's coastal marshes and major river systems. These surveys – usually 10 miles long – are conducted from a boat at night.

Biologist and conservation officers record every alligator they encounter. They attempt to approach them to accurately estimate the length of each animal to the nearest foot. In good habitat, alligators grow about one foot per year up to their sixth or seventh year. This information is used to document population trends and nesting success from year to year.

“A major task of the alligator program is responding to the approximate 100 to 200 alligator complaint calls we receive annually from the public,” Castle said. “Calls usually begin to come in during early spring, and they peak during the breeding season.”

Like many wildlife species, alligators are very territorial during the breeding season from late April to June. Adult male alligators will travel long distances in search of breeding females. Also, young males will quickly disperse from the territory of adult male alligators.

Large adult males are cannibalistic and are the greatest cause of mortality to hatchlings and other adult alligators. As a result, many immature alligators end up in creeks,

ponds, and lakes, where they have never been seen before. They have shown up in strange places like garages, swimming pools, and parking lots. Some problems occur, however, that are not the fault of the alligator. These are the fault of people too fascinated with wildlife.

Many times this interest results in people attracting wildlife by feeding. They want to observe and enjoy an animal at a closer distance. This is always a losing circumstance with alligators. It can turn into a potentially dangerous situation.

Alligators have a natural tendency to avoid people and human activity, except when being fed. Hand feeding alligators conditions them to lose their natural fear of humans.

Feeding causes them to associate humans and human activity with a source of food. Many times this is as simple as discarding fish remains in an area frequented by alligators.

This association can lead to an alligator attack, especially if an unsuspecting person comes near an area where an alligator has been hand-fed. Fortunately, an attack on a human has never been documented in Mississippi. Florida has documented more than 30 attacks since 1948, 16 of

which have been fatal.

Alligators that have been hand-fed are never relocated, due to the potential danger of their being conditioned to associate humans with a handout. If an officer determines that a person is knowingly feeding alligators, they are cited and prosecuted.

Control of nuisance alligators and the people who feed them are important aspects of our alligator program. Due to this, the alligator program established agent trappers to assist the DWFP in handling nuisance alligators.

Agent trappers are private individuals who, after a lengthy application process, are permitted to assist the DWFP with the capture, removal, relocation, and harvest of nuisance alligators. Agent trappers receive no compensation from the state and must provide their own equipment.

These individuals and their assistants are called upon to remove nuisance alligators from specific locations. Depending on the circumstances, alligators may be relocated to other suitable habitat. If they are harvested, the agent trapper must follow state and federal laws providing for the disposal of the alligator, its hide, meat, and parts.

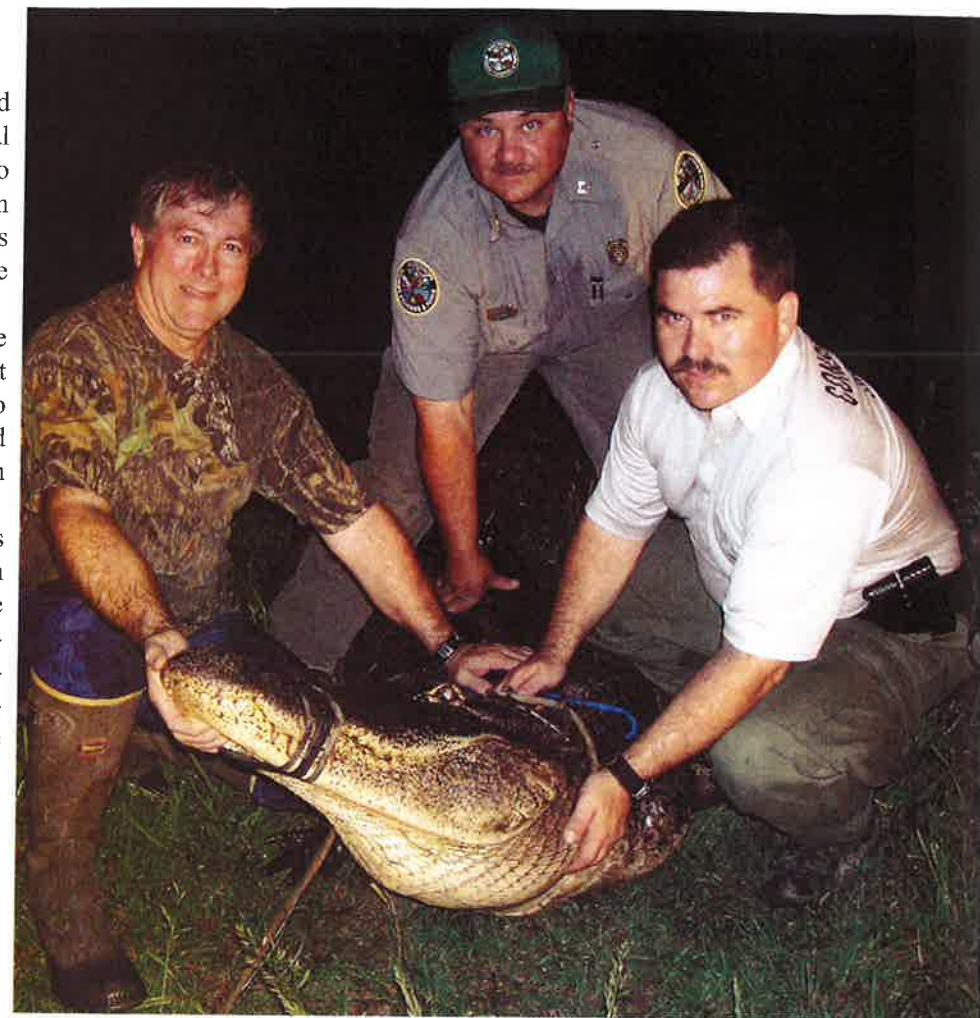
Not every alligator complaint results in the animal's removal. In fact, most of the time, the alligator is not a threat. It is merely doing what an alligator does. If investigators determine that an alligator is in the wrong place or is a threat to humans, pets, or livestock, it is removed either by an agent trapper or conservation officer.

In Mississippi it's important for everyone to remember what state law says about alligators. First, it is illegal for any person to disturb an alligator nest. You are not permitted to buy, sell, take, or possess alligator eggs.

You can't buy, sell, hunt, kill, catch, chase, or possess alligators or parts of these animals, unless you have a permit from the DWFP. And, of course, it's illegal to intentionally feed, or entice alligators with feed.

“One of the best things the public can do if they encounter an alligator is avoid it,” Director of Law Enforcement, Wildlife and Fisheries Don Brazil said. “Remember, alligators are an important segment of our ecosystem, and they deserve to live and be observed at a distance.”

Alligators have survived for thousands of years. By using sound conservation and management given by our



Alligator Program Coordinator Ricky Flynt, right, Fisheries Biologist John Skains, center, and Alligator Trapper Woodie Reaves captured this 11-foot, 7-inch gator at Ross Barnett north of Jackson for release at another site.

state's alligator program, they can continue to quietly exist in the Mississippi landscape.

Alligators are not viscous man-hunters as portrayed in the movies. But, as humans continue to encroach on the habitat of alligators and other wildlife species, conflicts are inevitable.

If you encounter an alligator, keep your distance and enjoy it for what it is – a wild animal. However, if circumstances do not allow for a natural co-existence, the DWFP alligator program can provide assistance.

To report a nuisance alligator or any illegal activity involving alligators, including harassment, possession, or feeding, call your local DWFP district office. Or, contact our Jackson Office at 601-432-2400.

Ricky Flynt, of Clinton is a wildlife biologist and the leader for the Alligator/Furbearer Program for the Department of Wildlife, Fisheries & Parks.