



9-07-06 TO 9-010-06 FLORIDA ALLIGATOR HUNT

Paul and Andrew Plante and Dr. Greg Bonham

Outfitter- Lee Lightsey of OutWest Farms

HUNT #54

We left Columbia in Greg's BMW for the 10 hour drive down to Okeechobee, Florida. The drive was as uneventful as it was pleasant traveling in that vehicle. I think we talked about hunting the whole way down while Andrew slept, read a little and worked on all his school work that he was going to miss. After frequent pit stops, we arrived at 5 pm in full anticipation of what the upcoming night would have in store for us. The plan was to go out after dark and hunt the alligators from an airboat but after contacting Lee he suggested we go out in a regular boat in one of the huge canal systems surrounding Lake Okeechobee and attempt to harvest some big gators with a crossbow since we could sneak up on them with a trolling motor. That just sounded fantastic to us especially since we would be on the airboat the next evening.

After checking in to the Best Western hotel and settling in, we went to get a bite to eat and made the ritualistic trip to Wal-Mart to get any forgotten items and the necessary licenses. We met Lee at a Texaco station at 7:30 pm just as it got dark. He had brought along some help and his name was "Bumpy". "Bumpy" has a lot of experience with large gators also as he is the local problem gator trapper. We put the large flat bottom fiberglass center console boat in and made our way up the dark and murky 100 yard wide canal. At first, we used the Yamaha outboard engine to slowly idle up the canal but as soon as we started catching the glimmering eyes of our reptilian inhabitants on the surface reflecting back to us from our headlamps, we began to use the trolling motor to stealthily make our way up to the floating gators. Greg or Andrew would get ready with the large 200 pound crossbow rigged with a large harpoon that was attached via a nylon rope to a floating buoy. The buoy was itself just hung on a pole underneath the crossbow that way when the alligator took off after being hit the buoy would fly off into the water behind him. Otherwise he would pull you and the bow in with him into the murky depths.

As we silently approached to within 20 feet of the unsuspecting gator, Greg or Andrew would fire the crossbow bolt into him or at least attempt to. Andrew hit three for

three while lets just say it took Greg a little while to get use to the crossbow. Despite the close range and the powerful bow, a shot at the wrong angle would just deflect off the back of the animal but most of the stalks ended in failure because they would hear us coming even though we were dead silent. As we approached from behind and were just about to fire, they would submerge without a hint that they had just been there. Occasionally, the large gators would erupt and seemingly dance on the surface of the water before going down. But we were successful on two nice gators. Andrew took an 8 footer and Greg ended up hitting a 12 footer which yanked the boat in all directions as they hung onto the rope for dear life. After getting them close enough to the boat by physically hand lining them up from their liar, we would attempt to dispatch them with a

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six foot bang stick. What a wild show they put on at the edge of the boat because one, you never expect to see what emerges from the depths and second, they are less than happy to be there. Both Andrew and Greg really became enamored using the .44 caliber bang stick. All the while I kept behind the action trying to get good photos in the darkness which was a challenge in and of itself. We didn't finish hunting that night till 2:30 am but we left with two nice gators and a whole new and exciting experience under our belt.

It wasn't hard to get to sleep after making it back to the hotel and we slept in till 10:30 before getting up and heading out back to Lee's alligator farm to take pictures of the previous night's harvest. Lee has a complete set up that includes raising the baby gators to a full five feet before harvesting them and processing them for their meat and skins. We did get some excellent pictures of Greg's gator, what an impressive animal. After getting a nice lunch on that Friday 9-8, we met Javier on Lee's farm at 4:30 pm to hunt hogs in the swamp. This was a surprise for Andrew because he had never seen or even heard of a swamp buggy. It is basically a monster truck with a huge deck way up in the air to hunt and travel through the swamps on. It took us the better part of three hours to find and harvest two hogs.

The plan for the rest of the evening which had already being discussed was to meet Lee at the Texaco station again at 8 pm after grapping a quick bite. This time we were to go out on Lake Okeechobee and hunt from a high speed air boat powered by a real aircraft engine and propeller. The difference this time was that as we sped across the water and masses of low lying vegetation and reed beds in total darkness guided only by our headlamps, we would spot the alligators on the surface again by their reflective eyes and rapidly approach them and make a quick estimation of their size prior to reaching them. If they looked to be a big alligator near or exceeding the ten foot mark, we would throw a spear tipped with a harpoon which in turn was hooked to a cable that was tied to a long braided rope that ended up latched to a large red buoy. The hope is to place the harpoon into the large lizard before he disappears or you go by him at high speed. It sounds difficult but is actually much harder then it sounds especially estimating the size of the animal because once he has the harpoon in him under his skin they tend to be very upset and bite anything that is close but that is not before they pull the buoy into the

thickest available vegetation around which you must go into to get him out. So we really only try to stick the large ones since releasing the smaller ones is no easy task but it can be done. Lee has two amazing abilities, one of which is to distinguish at large distances the eyes of a reptile from the reflection of the headlamps coming off of the small ripples in the water's surface made by the wind. The second one is the accuracy he possesses in throwing the harpoon tipped spear into the gator while traveling at 25 mph.

After leaving the dock and taking our positions on the airboat with me upfront and Greg and Andrew way up top, we took a short 20 minute ride across a portion of the very shallow lake which has a maximum depth of 15 feet. We arrived into an area that was

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surrounded by marshy islands of grass and weeds which we proceeded to rapidly circle spotting the unsuspecting gators, most of which were too small. The first one we harpooned and got to the boat successfully was a solid 9 to 10 footer which Greg quickly dispatched with his favorite new toy the bang stick after wrestling with him at the side of the boat. Lee then harpooned a small one that he had mistaken for a large specimen and had no choice but to kill that one since the harpoon was buried too deep to get out. After getting both of the gators situated in the boat's bottom, Lee mentioned that he thought the big ones would be in the heavy weeds trying to get out of the mild wind and waves. So we started traveling right over the islands of weeds looking into the small semi-open bathtub size water holes hidden within the reeds.

As we traveled over another small opening within one of the island of matted weeds and reeds, Lee and I spotted a very large what I thought to be a semi-submerged log at first off the right hand side of the boat. Lee immediately knew it was a huge gator and it only took me a split second to recognize that also. Lee let off of the throttle and threw the spear into the back of the behemoth which bounced right off of him and into the water. He lurched forward off the solid sandy bottom in the foot and half of water and came at the boat while simultaneously sending a shower of water over the entire boat with a flick of his tail. Lee mashed the throttle to avoid the beast coming into the boat and retrieved the harpoon and then stuck him in the tail while Greg pitched the buoy out. At the same time I was retrieving the camera to get some photos while Andrew jumped down to get into the action. As we turned the boat around to reassess the situation, the gator launched forward in the dimly lit night and literally bit the whole side railing off of the 16 foot fiberglass boat. Again, we sped forward to keep him out of the boat and then stopped. Lee became very concerned that this lizard was going to make into the boat and kill someone. He also was extremely concerned with the idea of Andrew trying to get close enough to hit him with the six foot bang stick in light of the fact that he has already showed us that he could easily launch himself much further than six feet. Andrew would here nothing of it and wanted to give it a try. So Greg then had the suggestion of adding an extension onto the bang stick by using the spear which we quickly taped together. All the while I am trying to get good photos of this whole scenario in the dark. I must diverge for a second to mention my whole roll in this trip was to take Greg and Andrew on the hunt and let them do the hunting while I filmed it. Because of that I didn't require a

license but was told that I couldn't participate in the taking of the gators which was fine with me since I had already harvested a nearly 13 footer a couple of years ago.

Andrew attempted three times to hit the gator with the bang stick. All of which ended the same way except the monster reptile was getting more and more agitated and aggressive. As Lee maneuvered the boat while holding Andrew tightly and helping him guide the now 12 foot bang stick to its intended target, the huge gator repeatedly attacked the pole and the boat at the same time, knocking Lee and Andrew off their feet the last time. Each lurch from the animal showered the boat with water compounding the situation with slippery footing. At that point, the gator came forward yet again and

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Andrew wisely recognized he just couldn't do it as he scrambled to get out of the way of the next onslaught. Lee then threw me the stick and basically ordered me to dispatch him right then before someone gets killed. Attempting to gain control of the animal by pulling on the rope that was attached to the buoy would have been ludicrous and would have only resulted in someone's hand being denuded of flesh as the rope was stripped away by the gator. With one movement, I pitched the camera into the driver seat as the stick came my way and moved to the edge of the boat and struck him in the side of the neck. Lee quickly reloaded the stick and handed it to Andrew as he came down to finish him off as I got the camera. One more shot and the great giant was done when Andrew hit him again right under the boat. What a rush, we were all elated with the unbelievable experience that had just unfolded around us and participated in. And with the recent record number of fatal human attacks by alligators in Florida, removing one this size was definitely a good thing. All gators this size are males and to be truthful, the 4000 tags the state of Florida issued this year won't put a dent in the population of the estimated 2 million alligators in the state.

Now the problem was getting the animal into boat. We all quickly realized that there was no way this gator was getting into the airboat without someone getting out and lifting him in. When Lee said someone needs to get out to help him load this alligator, we had no takers so I pulled off my shoes and jumped in, turned the boat around and then drug the gator around and strained with all my might to help lift him in. Meanwhile they took pictures of me moving him. We rested for a while and recapped what had just happened before taking off and going to get another gator around nine feet while on the way home. We were back home by 1 am and went to sleep by 2, looking forward to taking pictures of the gators in the am.

The next morning which was Saturday 9-09, we got up and had lunch on the way to Lee's farm only to find out when we arrived that they had already skinned the gator without our knowledge before we obtained any good pictures in the daylight. So we measured the skin at 12'11" and loaded the skulls and meat into the coolers and headed back to the hotel to watch the race and the Carolina game both of which were a disappointment. An early morning rise and another easy 9 hour drive back home ended another fantastic memorable trip with a very good friend and my son. We plan on tanning

the skins and probably mounting just the heads. We can't wait till next year for another probable trip. I can't imagine if we had had this filmed, what a TV show it would make.

