

Feeding Alligators: "It could cost you an arm and a leg"

FEEDING WILDLIFE IS A POPULAR pastime. In fact, according to the Wall Street Journal, in 2001 Americans spent 2.6 billion dollars on birdseed alone. Who knows how much money is spent annually on items such as corn and other grains to attract deer and turkey? The true figures would be shocking I'm sure, but that's a whole different subject. The point is that humans will go out of their way and will spend "an arm and a leg" in order to bring wildlife closer for viewing. There are obvious advantages and disadvantages that result from feeding wildlife, more than can be discussed in this article. A popular reason for feeding wildlife is to simply attract animals for viewing enjoyment. There is certainly a thrill in actually seeing wildlife with our own eyes rather than looking at a two-dimensional photograph in a book or magazine. The excitement and anticipation of attracting wildlife can be addictive as we do more to attract animals to our backyards and properties.

More often than not, the fun of having wildlife so close to home also creates problems. One of those problems is the desensitization to humans. Rather than instinctively avoiding humans and human activity, wildlife lose their natural fear of humans and may actually begin to associate them with a food source. Some wildlife species may even become destructive towards property or aggressive towards humans. Gradually, good intentions will create a nuisance situation. This is particularly true in the case of feeding alligators.

Feeding alligators is illegal in Mississippi, as well as most states where alligators reside. The main reason: being bitten by an alligator may literally cost you an arm and a leg or maybe even your life. Alligator attacks are rare occurrences. In fact, Mississippi has never documented an alligator attack. However, some states have documented alligator attacks, such as Florida, which estimates their alligator population to exceed 1 million compared to Mississippi's population estimate of 32-38,000 in the year 2000. Since 1948, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWCC) has documented 341 attacks on humans, of which 15 were fatal. In at least one fatality, the attacking alligator had been hand-fed by humans prior to the attack.

Alligators seldom attack humans for any reason other than food. They are not naturally aggressive towards humans, although adult female alligators will show aggression when protecting their nest. They will make hissing noises and lunge towards any intruder that gets too close.

Some "attacks" are merely accidental collisions. For example, a swimmer may incidentally bump into an alligator thus causing an instinctive bite at the swimmer in order to identify the source. Alligators are primarily nocturnal feeders. For this reason, nighttime swimming in areas where alligators exist is definitely discouraged. Although alligators are strong, they generally prefer prey that they can overpower easily, such as small mammals, wading birds, rough fish, frogs, snakes, and turtles.

According to the FWCC, the majority of alligator confrontations are directly related to the influx of human activity and development into natural alligator habitats. As development progresses in rural wetlands, alligator/human conflicts become more common. This is also a problem in Mississippi. Large portions of Mississippi's alligators are located in areas of the state that have experienced increased urban development over the last twenty years. These areas include the coastal counties of Hancock, Harrison, and Jackson, and the Ross Barnett and associated Pearl River areas of Rankin and Madison counties. The majority of alligator complaint calls received by the MDWFP come from these areas of the state. Many residents new to these areas have never encountered alligators in the wild before, much less in their "backyard." This usually results in one of two extremely different reactions: fear or curiosity. Fear is usually not necessary, and curiosity can cause problems. A happy medium is respect.

Curiosity is usually what results in people hand-feeding alligators. It seems so innocent to throw out food to get a closer look at such a unique animal and to invite friends and neighbors over to share in the experience. But, it always results in problems. At some point, people who feed alligators usually get tired of them being around or become fearful of going near the water because the alligator is comfortable with humans and now expects a handout. Feeding alligators has the potential for serious problems, whether it

is intentional or indirect feeding, such as fisherman regularly discarding fish scraps at the boathouse or fishing pier. Discarding of leftover food and fish scraps into the water in residential waterfront areas where alligators exist is a very big problem. Many times one neighbor can cause the demise of an alligator that was otherwise co-existing very well. On numerous occasions conservation officers respond to an alligator complaint call to find that everyone in the area was aware of the alligator and actually enjoyed its presence until one individual began to feed it. People report the alligator approached humans and pets as they go near the water's edge, whereas it used to avoid people. As a result, the alligator must be removed and destroyed. The MDWFP conservation officers, wildlife biologists, and agent trappers relocate 100-200 alligators annually, but an alligator can never be relocated once it has been conditioned to hand-feeding due to obvious concerns of simply relocating a problem.

Report any illegal activity involving alligators to your local MDWFP district or central office. Don't hesitate to report others who are feeding alligators. The arm, leg, or life you save may be your own.

Here are some DO's and DON'Ts for living around alligators:

- Do** – enjoy and respect alligators from a safe distance.
- Do** – supervise small children and pets near water.
- Do** – report anyone who feeds or harasses alligators.
- Do** – educate others about the danger of feeding alligators.
- Do** – store caught fish in a live-well or cooler rather than a stringer over the side of the boat.
- Do** – report nuisance alligators to your local MDWFP district or central office.

Don't – try to catch or harass an alligator. It may provoke aggression, and it is illegal.

Don't – swim at night.

Don't – throw fish or food scraps near the water or leave them on shore.

Don't – feed fish or animals such as ducks and geese. The activity can attract alligators to the area.

Don't – approach an alligator nest or hatchling alligators. Adult females may protect their young for up to two years after birth. **WI**

