

Wildlife Issues

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HUNTING AT A NEW LEVEL: Mississippi's First Alligator Hunting Season

By Ricky Flynt, Alligator/Furbearer Program Leader

THE OPENING DAY OF HUNTING SEASON may be one of the most anticipated days of the year for hunters across Mississippi. Opening days come and go every year. Every once in a while some event happens that provides lifelong memories - a child's first deer, the day you took the biggest buck of your life, or the year the opening day temperature was 80 degrees. For 32 hunters and over 100 of their guests, September 16, 2005, was an opening day they will never forget. These were the first participants in Mississippi's first alligator hunting season.

The idea of an alligator hunting season in Mississippi has been a consideration for a number of years. Alligators have expanded their range statewide since being removed from the Endangered Species List in 1987. The alligator population, in parts of the state, has reached levels that are beyond the capacity of control by officers and biologists of the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks (MDWFP). For some areas of the state, dealing with nuisance alligators on an individual basis is overwhelming for local Conservation Officers. Multiple alligator complaint calls may be received in multiple counties each day during the spring and summer months.

Management of the alligator population through regulated harvest is becoming necessary. Alligators are a renewable resource with very few predators to help control their numbers. In fact, after an alligator reaches about 4-5 feet in length, virtually the only predator of concern to it is man. As a result, populations can expand to unreasonable levels causing overcrowding and poor body conditions. These conditions only aggravate nuisance conflicts with humans as alligators disperse to find unclaimed territory and food sources. It took several decades of conservation work by state and federal agencies to recover the alligator from its endangered status of the late 1960's and 1970's. Managing Mississippi's alligator population through controlled limited harvest will help ensure their existence. Through fair-chase hunting opportunities for recreational hunters, the public can take an active role in assisting the MDWFP in alligator management and conservation.

Mississippi's first alligator hunting season started with an application process. Interest from Mississippi hunters was high. Over 1,200 applications were submitted in a two week period. Applicants were vying for a total of 50 permits, each of which would allow the harvest of one alligator at least four feet long. The location of the hunt was on the Pearl River north of Ross Barnett Reservoir between Hwy 43 and the Coal Bluff Park boatramp. All permittees were required to attend a mandatory Alligator Hunting Training Course in order to receive information on everything from basic biology and legal capture methods to processing the alligator for consumption or trophy. In fact, the finale of the course was a demonstration by the instructors as they captured and released a live 10' 10" alligator that weighed over 500 pounds. After attending the training course, the permittees went about the business of obtaining appropriate equipment, gear, and licenses in order to be properly prepared for the two, 3-day weekend season, September 16-18 and 23-25.

[Cont. on 19]

JASON BRIDGEWATER, OLIVE BRANCH

11' 2" • 382 POUNDS.



[Cont. from cover] Thirty-six permittees, male and female, and their hunting parties participated during the first weekend's hunt. Hunters ranged in age from 9 to 74 years old. Participants came from all corners of the state, and one from Florida flew in just for the hunt. One group from Greenville used the opportunity to film a professional hunting video. Another group, who called themselves "Team Ezelle," had customized shirts printed to identify their hunting team. The excitement and anticipation of the hunt was very evident! Just standing around the alligator check station at the Turcotte Research Facility on the first night of the hunt, you quickly realized the people who participated in the hunt were having an absolute blast, no matter how successful they were in harvesting an alligator. Truly a new experience for all of them, it did not matter how successful they were in harvesting an alligator, the excitement in their "war stories" of the night told it all. Hundreds of people participated as bystanders in boats and at the popular boat ramp parking lots to get a glimpse of the action and excitement of the historical event. Alligator "tail gating" became popular as family groups, neighbors, and friends took the opportunity to BBQ and socialize in lounge chairs as they waited into the early morning hours, anticipating each boat's approach to the dock. Each successful hunter was greeted by a barrage of people peering into their boats, taking pictures, and asking for a play-by-play story of the hunt. Many of them wanted to get close to the gator and feel its hide. Others chose to keep their distance and cautioned others to do the same, as chills ran up their spine.

During the first weekend, 18 alligators were harvested, a 50% success rate. The average length was 8' 6". The largest alligator was 11' 2" and weighed 382 pounds. Over the course of the weekend 50 alligators were hooked and lost, and 24 were caught and released.

The second weekend was hampered by dangerous weather as a result of remnants from Hurricane Rita. Despite the weather conditions, 23 out of 30 remaining permittees with unfilled tags toughed-it-out through tornado warnings, windy conditions, and torrential rain, at times. Friday, September 23, which had the best weather of the weekend, had 19 participants who harvested 8 alligators. The last two nights, which had the worst weather, only had 8 permittees participating, yet they were able to harvest 4 more alligators. The determined hunters of the second weekend harvested 12 alligators, resulting in a 52% success rate. Eight alligators were caught and released.

Overall, 41 permittees participated in the hunt and harvested 30 alligators, resulting in 73% success among participants. Permittees averaged 3.2 assistants per hunting party. Over 170 people participated in the hunt. Yet no one was injured, not even a scratch - unless you include broken hearts as a result of broken fishing rods and fishing line, which were quite common the first weekend. Rookie alligator hunters had to overcome a tremendous "learning curve" during those first nights of the hunt. However, as a consolation for the alligators, one shotgun was lost to the "Depths of the Mighty Pearl" when an alligator thrashed near the boat and knocked it out of the hands of the hunter.

Was it a success? By all accounts, yes. The purpose of this initially small alligator hunting opportunity was to provide adequate training to hunters and evaluate public interest, hunting regulations, hunter success, hunter safety, and other parameters before expanding public alligator hunting opportunities in Mississippi. For certain, there is interest among the public in hunting alligators. The regulations assured the methods of capture and harvest were effective and safe, and there was overwhelming approval from those who participated. You should have been there. Those who were will never forget it! **WI**

CAPTURE TECHNIQUES USED

CAPTURE TECHNIQUE	# MAN NIGHTS USED	NUMBER HARVESTED	HARVEST SUCCESS
Rod/reel snatch hook	85	23	27%
Bowfishing	6	3	50%
Snare pole	2	0	0%
Harpoon	0	0	0%
Rod/reel + bowfishing	7	2	29%
Rod/reel + harpoon	2	2	100%

2005 ALLIGATOR SEASON

# Applicants	1,205
# Permits drawn	50
# Participating permittees	41
# Total hunters	174
Average # licensed assistants per permittee	3.2
# Alligators captured/lost	73
# Alligators captured/released	32
# Alligators harvested	30
% Males / % Females	64 / 36
Largest alligator harvested	11' 2"
	382 lbs.
Average alligator harvested	8' 4"
	140 lbs.
Overall success rate	73%

(LEFT TO RIGHT) LEE BENOIST, WOODIE REAVES, AND BOBBY CLEVELAND RELEASE A CAPTURED ALLIGATOR.

VICKI MCNEAL
CANTON, 9' 2"

HAYDEN COMANS, AGE 9 HARVESTED
WITH DAD LEE COMANS, 10' 2"