

Alligators on Fort Stewart/Hunter Army Airfield

By Rachael Rourke, DPW Environmental Fish & Wildlife Branch



As the weather warms up, many people are retreating to the great outdoors. While Fort Stewart/Hunter Army Airfield (FS/HAAF), and South Georgia in general, provide excellent opportunities to do just that, it is important to remember that humans are not the only ones that call southeast Georgia home. The American alligator laid claim to this land long before humans came around. Alligator attacks on humans are very rare, but they do happen. Here is a little information to help keep you, your family, and your pets safe while you enjoy outdoor activities this summer.

Southeastern United States, from coastal North Carolina west to eastern Texas, is home to the American alligator. Alligators are typically found in or around wetlands or bodies of water, including ditches and retention ponds in populated areas. They are not restricted to one specific water body and move between bodies of water in search of food, or even water sources during drought or when another alligator has moved in. This means an alligator may be found in seemingly unlikely areas as they move about. Alligators have been found in the housing areas on FS/HAAF, in swimming pools, and even underneath a helicopter on HAAF. And they can be found simply sunbathing on a pond or river bank.

Alligators are critical to the biodiversity and long-term survival of wetlands. With the exception of man, adult alligators are top of the food chain and have no natural predators. An adult male averages 10 to 15 feet in length, while females are generally less than 10 feet long. Alligators reach sexual maturity when they are around 6 to 7 feet in length, usually about 6 to 10 years old and can live to be 35-50 years old. Alligators help control the population of rodents and other animals that might otherwise overpopulate this fragile wetland ecosystem. Small alligators feed on insects, amphibians, fish, snails, and other small prey. Adult alligators take larger prey including snakes, birds, turtles, other alligators, and mammals like raccoons or opossums. Though as opportunists, an alligator will eat nearly anything, including animal carcasses, pets, and in rare instances, humans. In addition to keeping other species populations in balance, alligators provide another great benefit to the wetland habitat: gator holes. Adult alligators will use their jaws and claws to create holes submerged under water. During the dry season, and extended droughts, these holes will hold water, providing critical habitat for fish, insects, snakes, turtles, birds, and other wildlife that inhabit this ecosystem.

The American alligator is a wildlife management success story. Due to hunting and habitat loss, the population plummeted in the 1950s, and the American alligator nearly became extinct. In 1967, the alligator was one of the first 78 species to be listed on the Endangered Species List. Through the combined efforts of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), state wildlife agencies across the South, and the

protection of the Endangered Species Act, alligator populations rebounded. In 1987, the USFWS pronounced the American alligator fully recovered and removed it from the endangered species list. The alligator now thrives throughout most of its range, and huntable populations exist in most states, including Georgia. Alligator hunting became legal on FS/HAAF in 2019, with proper permits and license. For more information on FS/HAAF alligator hunting, see the SOP for Hunting, Fishing, and Recreational Use on the Ft Stewart iSportsman website.

In general, alligators cause little concern for people. An alligator will typically try to avoid people. If they are in the middle of a pond or on the bank a good distance away and don't feel threatened, they may remain and continue to hang out. As you approach (whether you see them or not), they will normally go underwater to get away. On cooler days, they may remain in place, in hopes that you either don't see or that you will leave first. Occasionally curiosity may draw an alligator slightly closer, to see what you are and what you are doing (still keeping at a distance), but will quickly disappear if the threat level increases, such as a sudden movement. An alligator begins to be considered a nuisance when it loses its fear of humans, approaches quickly when it sees people, or does not try to avoid people. A few basic guidelines can help prevent an alligator attack:

- **LEAVE IT ALONE.** As with most wildlife, they are more afraid of you than you are of them. Increased interaction with humans cause it to lose its fear of man.
- **NEVER FEED AN ALLIGATOR.** Doing so not only endangers you, but also puts others at risk because it causes the animal to lose its fear of man. Most nuisance alligators have been fed by humans.
- **DON'T SWIM IN AREAS WHERE ALLIGATORS MAY BE PRESENT.** Swimming is prohibited in all FS/HAAF ponds and rivers.
- **MAINTAIN A SAFE DISTANCE.** Although they may appear clumsy on land, alligators can run very fast for short distances.
- **BE ESPECIALLY CAUTIOUS WITH SMALL CHILDREN AROUND POND EDGES.** Alligators assess the suitability of potential prey based on size. Attacks on children are therefore more common than attacks on adults.
- **ALLIGATORS WILL READILY PREY ON DOGS.** Never allow your pet to swim during warm weather unless you are sure no alligators are present.

Nuisance alligators and those that are large enough to pose a threat to humans are removed from FS/HAAF recreational lakes when warranted. The same goes for those that find their way into heavily populated areas of the Installation. If you find an alligator wandering through your yard or neighborhood, LEAVE IT ALONE! It is probably just looking for a new home, and will continue on its way if left undisturbed. If an alligator takes up residence in your pool or neighborhood pond, do not attempt to remove it yourself. Leave that task to the experts. You can report a nuisance alligator on FS/HAAF during working hours by calling the DPW, Environmental Division's Fish and Wildlife Branch at 571-801-2224 or 571-801-2225. For emergencies involving dangerous wildlife after hours or off-post, call 911. However, it is important to remember that alligators are a natural and important part of our aquatic ecosystems, so always assume that they may be present around any body of water, and take reasonable precautions as described above. If you see one, it should always be treated with the utmost respect – maintain a safe distance, never taunt or feed an alligator, and report sightings in the cantonment area to the Fish and Wildlife Branch.