

Alligators Always Attract Attention

By David Lavender, DPW Environmental Fish & Wildlife Branch

As the weather turns hot and the sun bakes the southeast once again, many of the wetlands that Fort Stewart's alligators call home are drying up. As their favorite water holes disappear, many alligators are forced to relocate into the few watery refuges that remain, though most bodies of water are already crowded with their scaly brethren. On the other hand, after a heavy rain, alligators may move to newly flooded areas in search of food. As a result, you may suddenly find an alligator in a pond, stream, or ditch that was alligator-free the day before. Alligators are occasionally seen in the cantonment area after dark, or even in broad daylight, and any body of water may harbor one or more of these reptiles. Alligator attacks on humans are very rare, but they do happen. The information provided in this article can help keep you, your family, and your pets safe this summer during outdoor activities.

Our American alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*), is found only in the Southeastern United States, from coastal North Carolina west to eastern Texas. There are two species of alligator, the American and the Chinese alligator (the American alligator is the larger of the two). Adult American alligator males average 10 to 15 feet in length, while females are generally less than 10 feet long. Alligators reach sexual maturity at about 6 to 10 years old, and are usually around 6 to 7 feet in length. The largest alligator ever recorded was 19 feet 2 inches long and weighed 2,200 lbs.

The American alligator is a wildlife management success story. Fifty years ago, alligator numbers plummeted as a result of market hunting and loss of habitat, and in 1967 the alligator was listed as an endangered species. Through the combined efforts of the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), state wildlife agencies across the South, and the protection offered by 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. Due to the fact that alligators are typically hunted at night, however, alligator hunting is not allowed on Fort Stewart/Hunter Army Airfield (FS/HAAF). The American alligator is the official state reptile of three states: Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi (Georgia's state reptile is the Gopher Tortoise).

Adult alligators are apex predators (at the top of the food chain/adults have no natural predators, except man), and are critical to the biodiversity and long-term survival of wetlands. They help control the population of rodents and other animals that might otherwise overpopulate and overtax this fragile habitat. Small alligators feed on insects, amphibians, fish, snails, and other small prey. Adult alligators take larger prey including snakes, turtles and mammals like raccoons or opossums. However, they are opportunists, and an alligator will eat a wide variety of prey, including carrion, and in rare instances, humans.

On FS/HAAF there is little cause for concern in regards to an alligator attack if a few basic guidelines are followed:

- **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, and 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 there are no alligators present.

Nuisance alligators (those 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, do not attempt to remove it yourself. Leave that task to 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 912-767-2584. 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, and seeing one in your local pond or drainage ditch is not necessarily cause for alarm, especially if the alligator is less than 6 feet in length. Nevertheless, alligators should always be treated with the utmost respect – maintain a safe distance and never taunt or feed an alligator.

