Florida officials attribute 6 deaths to alligator attacks since 1948. Louisiana's only known death attributed to such an attack was in 1734.

By ED CULLEN
Advocate staff writer

Louisiana hasn't had a fatal alligator attack in modern times because of the state's alligator management program, says the man who manages Louisiana's alligator season.

The only human death attributable to alligator attack that Johnnie Tarver knows about is the one on the banks of the Red River in the vicinity of the Natchitoches Post. The death occurred in 1734.

"We've had some bites," Tarver says, "but that was because people were feeding the alligators."

Florida's fatal alligator attacks — the most recent the death of a 4-year-old girl — Tarver attributes to Florida's less vigorous control program.

Even so, a Florida game official says there have been only six deaths attributed to alligator attack since 1948 and only 95 unprovoked attacks in the last 40 years. A Florida game official quoted in 1984 when an 11-year-old boy was killed by an alligator, estimated Florida's alligator population in the hundreds of thousands.

Louisiana's gator population is easily 500,000, says Robert Chabreck, a professor of wildlife at LSU.

Wildlife agents use aerial photography to estimate the number of alligator nests and from that number estimate alligator population, Chabreck says. As a Department of Wildlife and Fisheries employee in 1957, Chabreck initiated Louisiana's alligator research that included work on the animal's movements in its habitat, breeding behavior and growth.

Louisiana's alligator population dipped to an estimated low of 100,000 in the early 1960s, Chabreck says. By the late 1960s, there had been good recovery, he says, and by the early 1970s the state opened an experimental harvest after a 10-year ban on alligator-taking.

Tarver, who administers the Fur and Refuge Division of Wildlife and Fisheries, says it's not a matter of alligators impinging on humans but the other way around.

"We are living in alligator habitat," says Tarver, whose responsibilities include overseeing 500,000 acres of marshland.

The alligator is likely to show up anywhere from the Louisiana coast to the Arkansas border, the Texas line to the Mississippi line, Tarver says. Louisianaians, he says, grow up with a healthy respect for the alligator.

"Alligators can show up in any pond, any ditch, any bayou and, on occasion, in swimming pools," he says.

Chabreck, who handles alligator complaints in Baton Rouge for Wildlife and Fisheries, has removed alligators from homeowners' swimming pools, but his nominee for most surprising discovery goes to the woman in Cameron who found a 7-foot gator in her garage.

"This lady went out to her automatic washing machine, heard this hissing behind her and there was this big alligator." Alligator attacks are rare, but they are spectacular and, in the case of the little girl in Louisiana, tragic.

"Louisiana certainly has as many large alligators as Florida," says Chabreck. "I think a lot of it (alligator attack) is just chance. A major factor in Louisiana is less contact."

Louisiana has had a controlled harvest of alligators for about 15 years and maintains a call-out list of nuisance control officers who round up the bigger gators when the animals pose a threat to human safety, Chabreck says.

"Florida has all this, too, but their controlled harvest hasn't been aimed at taking out the big ones. Florida has been a little more protective of the big ones. Florida has a lot of lakes, too, where there are more people."

Male alligators grow a foot a year for eight or nine years. Female alligators grow at the same rate but slow in growth after five or six years. In the last 10 years, Chabreck says he's heard of only a couple of 12-footers.

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Male alligators grow a foot a year for eight or nine years. Female alligators grow at the same rate but slow in growth after five or six years. In the last 10 years, Chabreck says he's heard of only a couple of 12-footers. Alligators may live in excess of 60 years. Before man dominated the landscape, alligators grew to 10 feet. Chabreck knows of a documented case in which a gator reached the monstrous length of almost 20 feet.

"An 11-footer would be exceptionally large, now," Chabreck says.

The alligator that killed the little girl in a residential lake near Englewood, Fla., was 10 feet long. The child was wading with her brother and a friend when she was attacked by the alligator, dragged under water and drowned.

About four years ago, Wildlife and Fisheries officers hauled a 10-foot, 5-inch alligator from a drainage canal on the LSU campus.

In the marsh, alligators' nests provide raised ground where little high ground exists naturally. The high ground becomes a haven for birds, fish, mammals and insects. Alligators' underground dens form water holes for mammals and fish during drought. The residents hold short-term leases if the dens happen to be occupied.

"Alligators keep travel lanes open in the marsh," says Chabreck. "They provide passageways for smaller animals and fish from lake to lake."

Alligators are known to travel considerable distances overland, Chabreck says. The wildlife biologist and three graduate students are tracking the movement of 17 female alligators in Lacassine National Wildlife Refuge in southwest Louisiana. The alligators have been fitted with radio transmitters, Chabreck says.