Cameron Parish is gator country. The heel in the boot of Louisiana, it is bordered by Texas to the west and the Gulf of Mexico to the south. The largest parish in Louisiana by area, Cameron is also one of the most rural, with tiny hamlets like Hackberry, Cameron, Johnson's Bayou, Holly Beach, Grand Chenier, Oak Grove and Creole as its largest settlements. It's almost impossible not to live in the country in Cameron Parish, even if you live in town. Most of the human population of Cameron Parish is concentrated along U.S. 82, which snakes along the parish's southern edge, sometimes hugging the muddy coast, sometimes winding back up into and through the marshes. The alligator population, by comparison, ranges throughout the whole of the parish, mostly in the lowland marshes that constitute the majority of the terrain.

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Like every occupation, alligator hunting has its own vernacular. A guide to some of its turns of phrase:

- **Scutes** — the bony scales that cover an alligator’s back
- **Free-Shooting** — killing an alligator with a rifle and without the benefit of a hook and line
- **Melt** — the internal organs of cattle; a popular alligator lure
- **Sport Hunter** — a hunter who pays a guide to lead him to kill a large alligator
- **Snap** — a downed alligator here where the hook has not been swallowed by the alligator
- **Dowel** — a short wooden stake; an experimental substitute for an alligator hook currently being tested at the Sabine National Wildlife Refuge
- **Gator AIDS** — Rusty Welch’s term for the affliction he has observed in certain alligators in overpopulated areas whose heads are huge but whose bodies are scrawny
- **Tunnel Drive** — a boat engine system that runs water to the propeller through a tunnel beneath the hull, allowing boats to travel in extremely shallow water

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Alligator hunting season has just opened in Cameron Parish. At Benny Welch’s house and alligator processing plant near Oak Grove, hunters have been dropping off gators by the truckload all morning. Although the intermittent downpours and the concrete gray skies have left the air somewhat cooler than your typical late August afternoon in Southern Louisiana, the dead gators must be preserved and a number of scaly appendages poke out of dark water in five huge tubs beneath an ancient oak that bends almost horizontal to the ground.

Welch isn’t what you might expect an alligator hunter to be like. A retired school principal with kindly blue eyes and a mellow drawl, he’s been hunting alligators since the practice was legalized in 1972. He’s expanded his operations since then with the help of his sons, Rusty, Ben and Yancy, making a business of selling alligator meat and eggs and even trinkets made out of alligator teeth, scutes and skulls. Cameron Parish was one of the first parishes to reopen alligator hunting in 1972, and Welch was one of the first to establish a legitimate business operation around the processing of alligator carcasses.

“They hunted them way back then, of course,” says Welch. “But what really hurt is when they discovered the marsh buggy. And then you could get through the marshes and pull them out of their holes. And they killed all the females. And after that, they stopped the hunting for about 15 years.”

Today, the hunting season runs roughly for the month of September, although it began this morning on Aug. 28. The institution of hunting in late summer has proven to make sense for both hunters and preservationists. By September, alligator eggs are just beginning to hatch in sealed nests deep in the marsh. When the females hear the infant alligators first scrambling out of their shells, they return to dig the nests open and free the baby reptiles. Drawn far into the marsh by their maternal duties, the females largely escape the annual alligator harvest. Hunters benefit from the timing as well, because females aren’t as
large as males and a big alligator is always more desirable than a small one.

"The females very rarely get up to eight feet," says Ben Welch. "They stop growing. What happens is the females, when laying eggs, use a lot of caldum up and their bodies don't grow as much because they use a lot of what would be bone mass to lay the eggs." Although hunters can keep alligators larger than three feet and sell them, they can only catch a limited number every year. A bigger alligator means more money for the hunter as well as whoever may be selling the meat and various parts, so the fewer females on the hook the better.

Ben Welch is beaming today and he tells us he has a surprise for us. A hunter brought in a monster gator today and he wants us to check it out. He brings us farther back on his property, where a number of small white buildings are clustered next to an old barn. A drum filled to the brim with alligator paws and random parts sits outside, next to a couple of fleshy, bright pink hulks that are apparently the freshly skinned and cleaned carcasses of unlucky alligators.

Inside one shed, the great green-black gator is stretched out on a metal table. "They caught him in a fish pond," says Welch. "He was living the good life. They measured him at the Rockefeller Refuge — 12 feet, 850 pounds."

This particular gator was killed by a sport hunter. Sport hunters pay up to $1,500 to go out and shoot a gator, which makes it worthwhile for the local hunters, who would make considerably less selling the same gator themselves. This sport hunter, a dentist from nearby Creole, has paid an additional $1,000 to purchase the hide of the gator, which he plans to have tanned and mounted in his office. The alligator is here to be skinned and the Welches will take the meat.

"Then I'll sell the meat," says Ben Welch. "That's what I do. I sell alligator meat year round. We sell alligator meat to restaurants, distributors and stuff like that. I sell probably between 4,000 and 5,000 pounds of meat a month. Like off this big boy here, we'll get 150 to 175 pounds of meat off him."

In a normal situation, where sport hunters aren't involved, the Welches would have bought the gator whole from the hunter. The Welches and other folks with skinning sheds and processing businesses pay the hunters according to the length of the alligator and the worth of its hide. For 8-foot alligators and above, they're paying approximately $22 dollars a foot this year. They turn around and sell the skin and make their money back, keeping the meat and various parts virtually for free.

"I give all the money I make on the skin to the trapper," says Ben Welch. "But you get 150 pounds of meat off that sucker at $5 a pound, that's $700 of meat, you know, not bad." The Welches also hunt alligators on the 4,000 or so acres of marshland on their own property. When the hunting season is over, Ben Welch continues to sell alligator meat, buying alligators from farmers who raise them year-round. The patriarch of the Welch family, Benny, was actually one of the first people to explore the commercial possibilities of alligator meat.

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We started selling it at around $1 a pound," says Benny Welch. "Like in 1987, they didn't sell it. Of course, people would eat it at the house and stuff like that. But we started selling it and now it's all over the world." Although Benny Welch oversees the various activities of hunting, skinning and selling of alligator hides and carcasses, his main focus seems to be the selling of alligator skulls and the conversion of alligator parts to trinkets and jewelry, which he sells to gift shops and truck stops across America.

On another part of the property, in a quiet pasture shaded by a thick grove of oaks, hundreds of alligator heads in various states of decay are lined up in neat vertical rows according to size. Welch moves the heads out to this grove so that maggots will remove all the fleshy parts and loosen the teeth, which he will then use to make key chains and necklaces. Direct sunlight would damage the skulls and make the already intense stench unbearable, so the oaks' shade is essential to the process.

With a number of the skulls, especially those not overly damaged by bullets, Welch removes the teeth and whitens the skulls by soaking them in Clorox and then reattaches the teeth. He then sells the whole skulls to distributors, who move them to favorite shops and truck stops across America.

"Whenever they see these big alligators, they just start shooting," says Benny Welch. "They're becoming carnivorous. We're in all the Flying J truck stops. We're in TA Travel Plazas, fixing to get into Love's truck stop, stuff like that." Rusty Welch has also been gathering video footage of alligator hunting over the years that he is in the process of turning into a documentary. A number of producers have expressed interest in the project and he plans to market it alongside Cajun Ben's products.

"We have about 400 outlets now," says Rusty Welch, a stocky young man with short brown hair. "I'm the salesman. That's why I'm having fun right now. But when everybody else is kicked back, I'm going to be out on the road selling it. We have our stuff in all the Flying J truck stops. We're in TA Travel Plazas, fixing to get into Love's truck stop, stuff like that." Rusty Welch has also been gathering video footage of alligator hunting over the years that he is in the process of turning into a documentary. A number of producers have expressed interest in the project and he plans to market it alongside Cajun Ben's products.

Although Benny Welch and all of his sons, as well as a number of other hunters we met, have benefited from the resurgence of the alligator population since the 1970s, they all seemed concerned that the government's efforts to maintain alligator numbers have been almost too successful.

"There's no more food for the alligators," says Benny Welch. "They're becoming cannibalistic and they're eating their young." Welch also says that the gators have eliminated the nutria population and are starting to take a toll on the game fish, ducks and egrets. Ben Welch suggests that, despite criticism alligator hunting has received over the years, the hunters are the only thing holding the alligator population in check.

Driving from Oak Grove to Holly Beach as the gray afternoon slips dusk and quickly becomes night, the Welch's words sink in. In the roadside ditches and further out into the surrounding marshes, pair upon pair of orange eyes twinkle silently.

About an hour's drive from the Welch compound, and directly north of Holly Beach, is the Sabine National Wildlife Refuge. Composed of 125,000 acres of primarily marshland, the waters of the Sabine are bristling with alligators. Even on this rainy morning, gator heads, like floating logs but for the distinctive snouts and eyes, may be seen in almost every roadside canal and pond.

The U.S. Department of Wildlife & Fisheries, which runs the preserve, has recognized the importance of alligator hunters to the balance of the marshland ecosystem and works with hunters to help curb the alligator population. Eight hunters are currently allowed to kill gators in the Sabine, with a lottery held every three years to determine who those hunters are from a pool of applicants.

"As a National Wildlife Refuge, we don't typically allow commercial activities. We're not allowed," says Chris Peas, project director of the South Louisiana Refuges. "We have a law called the Refuge Improvement Act, passed in 1997, that only allows us to do commercial activities if they benefit some of our management, if the biological result is positive."

Charged with maintaining the balance of the alligator numbers at the Sabine, Peas and his staff have made efforts to improve the selectivity of the harvest. Peas points out that trapping a large majority of males is best if you're trying to maximize reproduction, but if you're trying to maintain a steady population and he's been trying to figure out how to harvest gators on a 50 percent male, 50 percent female basis.

For the first time this year, hunters in the refuge are required to use a device that Peas says will make this sort of harvest possible. Whereas most alligator trapping is done using large hooks baited with some sort of meat,
most of the Sabine hunters will use baited wooden sticks, or dowels. Approximately 4 inches long, the dowels are meant to stick in the alligators' throats without fatally wounding them.

Each end of a dowel is connected to a rope with a piece of line. When the alligator swallows the dowel and bait and tries to fight, the rope pulls taut and causes the dowel to be lodged in the alligator's throat. Furthermore, the dowel system is designed to allow the hunters to release certain gators back into the refuge according to their size and sex. The use of hooks, which are swallowed by the alligators and pierce the lining of their throats and stomach, prohibits their safe release.

So far, the dowels have proven fairly successful, especially in deep waters where the alligators can't find firm footing to yank the device from their gullets. Hunters who have been allocated certain shallower areas of the refuge have fared worse, finding a number of downed lines, where the gators have apparently worked the dowels free. Although Peas suggests that the bad weather may be a factor in these downed lines, he admits that modifications on the device will have to be made for next year's harvest.

At around 9:30 a.m., the hunters are starting to return to the boat landing, where the Sabine staff has set up a measuring station. Visiting researchers are also on hand to determine whether the dowels are damaging the alligators internally or not. To do this, they're using an optical scope with a three-foot lead that they slip down into the alligator's throat. So far, the dowels seem safe, except for a few nicks found in the throat of a gator that had struggled unsuccessfully to pull the dowel out.

Although some of the hunters from the shallow areas are somewhat disgruntled at having to use the dowels, they mill around the weighing station, conversing with the Sabine staff about the morning's hunt, the bad weather and the pros and cons of the experimental system. Even the ones who haven't had a great catch have a few gators to sell later on and they'll have plenty of time to come back and catch their limit in the following days.

"The alligator harvest in this part of the world is such a cultural thing," says Peas. "It also allows for a real value to this marsh, so that people will maintain it so that they can keep harvesting alligators."
A
fter dodging thunderstorms in the
Sabine for a few hours and dining
on fresh fried shrimp and catfish at
a small seafood joint in Holly Beach, we
head west again toward the settlement of
Johnson Bayou to meet up with Howard
Romero, a hunter who has agreed to take us
out on an airboat hunt on his property in
the morning. Like a number of people we
ran into in Cameron Parish, Romero doesn't
make all of his living from hunting alliga-
tors. He also runs an oil processing compa-
ny, raises about 200 head of cattle, runs race
horses and does a little land leasing on the
side. He grew up on the same land he lives
on today, between the coastline and the
marsh, and he's been hunting alligators
since he was a little boy when he hunted
with his father, who, in turn, had hunted
with his grandfather. Today, he hunts with
his children and nephews.

"We're a family oriented group," says
Romero, a friendly middle-aged man with a
light brown mustache and a hint of Texas
twang in a voice that is uncannily reminis-
cent of Merle Haggard's. "We take the little
ones. We have some as young as three and
four we take hunting and they grow up hunt-
ing alligators. And while they're learning how
to hunt, they're also learning a lot of things
about conservation and nature because we
harvest alligators in much the same way we
do cattle. We raise them. We don't go out and
just slaughter them. We take what our tags
are for. Then we leave them alone and take
care of them for a while."

Tags are given to landowners based on the
acreage of their land and the salinity of their
marshes. Fresh water marshes merit the most
tags, as alligators live mainly in fresh water,
with fewer tags given to brackish marshes
and saltwater marshes. Bonus tags for alliga-
tors under five feet long are now being issued
so that smaller gators won't be cut loose and
left to die because hunters want to fill all their
tags with enormous alligators.

The standard procedure for hunting alliga-
tors today starts with a 12- to 14-aught hook.
The hook is baited with everything from
blackbirds and pogies to mullet and mullet.
Romero opts to use uncooked chicken quar-
ters, which he says work as well or better than
anything. The hooks are hung from clothes-
pins attached to long cane poles that extend at
a 45-degree angle above the water. Dangling
about two feet above the water, the hooks are
fastened with a thick line to a piece of rebar or
wood that is securely implanted in the bank.

"The main reason we put it two feet up is
you don't want to catch the little ones," says
Romero. "You want to catch a bigger alliga-
tor. He'll come up out of the water, grab the
bait, swallow it. And the reason we leave a lot
of string is because we want him to be able to
swallow the hook before he swims off."
don’t yield anything, but a gator has apparently taken the bait of a third one and the line runs up into a heavy patch of marsh grass and reeds.

Stopping the airboat, Calisse readies his pistol as Howard Romero drags the unwilling reptile from the grass. A rather small five-footer, it doesn’t put up too much of a fight and Calisse kills it with a swift shot of his .257 magnum. Hauling the gator into the boat, they cut the line that held the hook and toss the gator into the middle of the boat. Any number of different types of firearms are used to kill alligators in this situation, but small caliber pistols are the most common and effective, especially if maintaining the integrity of the skull is a priority. The ideal place to shoot an alligator is directly in the middle of his head, just behind the eyes, according to Romero, because “that’s where his brain is.” Although the hook and line method is by far the most common way to trap alligators, free-shooting is just as legal and sometimes recommended in the case of big gators, which are often too wary to be caught on a hook.

The Romeros repeat the process three more times before taking us back to our car. It’s clear that they’ve done this hundreds of times and they nab a seven-footer and an eight-footer just as easily as the first one, handily hauling each one up, shooting it once and tossing it to the middle of the boat. Although Howard Romero’s never been hurt by an alligator he’s had a few close calls, and he says the most dangerous thing is wrapping the line around your arm or hand when you’re pulling an alligator into the boat.

“Sometimes you’re pulling on one and you think you’ve got a five-footer,” says Romero. “Then his head breaks the water and he’s a 12-footer, and he’ll jerk it right out of your hand. I know people who’ve lost fingers and broken hands that way.”

Driving out of Johnson Bayou, we head toward Holly Beach, then north through the Sabine Refuge and toward Hackberry, which Romero assures us is the quickest way to make it to Interstate 10. Just as we’re leaving the Sabine, another storm breaks and I notice head after head sinking slowly in the rain-spattered water.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

A graduate of Sacred Heart in Grand Coteau and the San Francisco Art Institute, Debbie Fleming Caffery first made a name for herself photographing the sugar cane harvest in rural southern Louisiana.
Her images have earned her numerous accolades, such as the coveted Lou Stoumen Prize for documentary photography and the Governor of Louisiana’s Award for Excellence in the Arts. Her work is part of the permanent collections at many prominent institutions including the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., New York City’s Museum of Modern Art, Harvard University’s Carpenter Center for Visual Studies, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Bibliotheque National in Paris.
She also makes the best lamb chops in the world!
Once the alligator has swallowed the hook, he usually tries to swim away. When he finds himself hooked, he'll thrash around for a while and then lay at the bottom of the bayou or pond and run up onto the bank in an effort to dislodge the hook from his throat. There's also a trick to baiting the hook to ensure the alligator swallows it.

"You run it through the leg and hide it up in the meat so that he'll swallow it and won't feel the barb," says Romero. "Because if he feels that sharp point, he'll spit it out." Alligators are nocturnal predators, so most of the hunting is done at daybreak, after they've had all night to go for the bait.

The following day, we wake up just before dawn and drive in a steady downpour from our cabin in Holly Beach to a gas station in Johnson Bayou where Romero has planned to rendezvous with his fellow hunters. The rain lifts just as we arrive and we follow Romero out to the entrance to some of his hunting lands. His nephew Calisse Romero follows as well, and we all pile into his airboat, which roars to a start and carries us over 50 yards or so of solid ground until we hit one of the tiny bayous that wind through these marshes.

Things have changed since the days of Howard Romero's father, who would sometimes walk through shallow waters unreachable by boat to hunt gators, often skinning them there in the marsh and hiking as far as three to five miles with 125 pounds of alligator hide on his back.

The airboat breezes from pond to pond, effortlessly gliding over stands of six-foot tall rushes and hopping over the occasional ridges of land that crisscross the marsh. The Romeros use a Global Positioning Satellite tracking system to keep track of all their lines in the labyrinthine marshes and they hop from pond to pond through the marsh grasses to check them. The first couple of lines

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