Goin' GATORIN'

Hide and seek, seeking hides: Wily hunter tells how it's done

Lynn Gayneaux sets baited line of beef lung for gator. The Gayneauxs have tags for 36 gators this season.

By LEO BASHINSKY
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It is almost noon Sunday on the second day of the alligator season, last weekend, in the swamps and marshes of Old North Bayou southwest of Henry.

Lester "Pee Wee" Gayneaux, standing in a 15-foot flat-bottom aluminum boat, strains to pull in one of his alligator lines, tied to a "chicken" tree on the bank behind him.

He heaves back, putting his whole weight into his effort to bring the reptile to the surface.

"Don't miss, please don't miss," he repeats over and over to his hunting partner, Elson Duhon, who has a high powered rifle aimed at the water where he thinks the gator will surface.

Suddenly, a huge black skull breaks above the water, and for a couple of seconds, the reptile's and Gayneaux' eyes are locked on each other in silence.

Then the report of Duhon's .308 caliber H&K automatic rifle shatters the moment. Water sprays into the air and the alligator disappears below the surface.

Once again Gayneaux pulls the alligator to the surface, and, when the head appears, the body slowly turns on its side while black water belches from its mouth.

"That's the biggest alligator he's ever caught," Gayneaux said.

Gayneaux returns to his boat, sits down and lights a cigarette, while the rest of the hunting party continues to examine the giant alligator.

"Don't miss, please don't miss," he repeats over and over to his hunting partner, Elson Duhon, who has a high powered rifle aimed at the water where he thinks the gator will surface.

"He's big and fat and heavy - that's for real," Gayneaux said.

"An alligator usually swallows the bait whole and the hook is set in his stomach as he swims away and he can't work it out.

"But, if he is hooked in his mouth or jaw he can work on it. He's so big, in ten more minutes he would have pulled and straightened the hook out and gotten away," Gayneaux said.

"That's a black gator, he's a mean gator," Gayneaux said.

"He's big and fat and heavy - an alligator that big can snap your leg if it hits you with it. We're just going to give him some time to settle down and stop shaking," he said.

At the wind rushes by, the boats speed ahead, and Gayneaux reflects on the hunt.

"We're just out here hunting big lizards - and that's for real," he says.

As Gayneaux holds the end of the tape on the tip of the gator's nose, Lynn pulls the tape out to its limit. It does not reach the end of the reptile's tail.

Lynn then reels the tape in and measures the remaining length.

"Thirteen feet nine inches," he announces.

Gayneaux walks over to the alligator's tail and notes: "There's about six inches missing from his tail - he would have been over 14 feet."

"I wonder what could have been big enough to tangle with him?" he asks.

Gayneaux's wife Dorothy, who during the hunt has been in the shed butchering the five alligators caught the previous day, looks pleased at the big gator.

"That's the biggest alligator he's ever caught. Thirteen feet seven inches - that's biggest before this," she says.

She estimated the gator's weight at around 700 pounds, and guessed it would yield more than 250 pounds of meat when fully dressed.

Gayneaux and Lynn use a 12-foot tape measure to measure its length.

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Due to its size, it is a valuable catch, Gayneaux said. "Alligator hides are expected to go for around $50 dollars a foot this year but a large gator like this one you can get you a better price than that. The buyers want the bigger gators," he said.

"Because the hide is big they will make briefcases and luggage out of it. It's more valuable," Dorothy adds.

She also said they hope to get between $1.50 to $1.75 per pound for alligator meat — at 250 pounds, $350. The price fluctuates during the season, which ends Oct. 8. Gayneaux said he has tags for 36 gators.

Gayneaux, who acts as a game warden for a couple of landholders in the area, said he has been hunting alligators a long time. "I've always hunted and I've hunted alligators about 23 years or so," he said. "They closed it for a while, about 10 years ago, when the alligators got on the endangered species list, but I still hunted them as a nuisance hunter for Wildlife and Fisheries office."

Gayneaux said he learned how to hunt gators from two veteran hunters, Weston Theall and Jeb Callahan, both longtime friends of his.

"I've been chased — oh, yeah — I've been bit. I've gotten them out from underneath school buses, from inside mailboxes — I've been through it all," he recalls.

An event which happened to him on opening day of this season proves his point.

"We had an alligator in the boat and I was trying to get the hook out of his jaw," he said, "trying to save the hook, when he got two of my fingers in his mouth."

Gayneaux said Duhon jumped over and pried the gator's jaws open.

The gator hunter said he "was hoping he wouldn't start turning and spinning or he would have broken my fingers off."