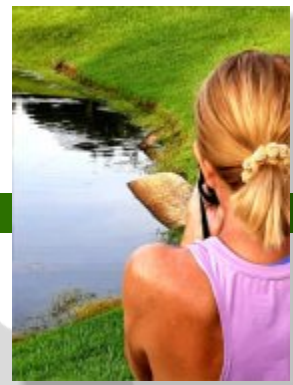


GATOR WATCH

REPORT AND PHOTOS: BECKY HINSON



Alligators feed primarily at night, so you can imagine my surprise when I looked outside and saw one enjoying lunch on a Sunday afternoon. I grabbed my camera and raced out to join him. He didn't disappoint and I ended up with a series of fantastic gator feeding photos.

Our pond on Olympic Drive provides multiple types of wildlife to photograph. We see foxes, deer, nutria, occasionally a river otter, all kinds of birds, turtles and different species of fish. This time of year we have several alligators migrating through looking for a mate. Most are small but occasionally we'll see one measuring 6 feet or more. I enjoy photographing them, with a zoom lens, at a safe distance. Don't try close up photography with your phone or you may end up being the main course.

We estimated our lunch guest to be at least 7 feet, possibly more. Unfortunately, we don't have many fish left as the constant flow of gators and large birds have nearly emptied our pond. At one point, we had over a dozen carp, which

are necessary to control the grass. Now, thanks to the alligators, there are none and we're waiting on May Management to obtain a permit to restock. Our lake is currently home to this large gator and a smaller one measuring around 4 feet. There are several gators throughout the rest of our neighborhood ponds but the larger ones have apparently moved on in search of a mate. Always be aware of the possibility of one when you're around any of our lakes. I was told someone recently fishing in Magnolia, was chased up the bank by a gator chasing his fish on the line. In that case, I recommend running...fast!

It's two days later and I'm done writing about our gator when, surprise, another one showed up. Gator number two was approximately 6 feet and was casually swimming across the middle of the lake when I spotted him. I grabbed my camera and raced out back. I'd like to give a special thank you to my next door neighbors as I continually set off their motion sensor security cameras running through their backyards.

SUNDAY - GATOR #1



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In the few seconds it took to get outside, the gator already had his prey. Another one of our catfish had met an early demise. It's amazing how fast they move in the water and how powerful they are when they reach the bank.

Alligators like this are the reason we warn neighbors fishing with small children and those letting their dogs run and play in the water. Just recently a man was killed by an alligator while hunting frisbees in a Clearwater lake. In June, a man lost his 40 pound Lab while playing fetch with him in a Tallahassee lake. The dog was standing in a shallow area when the gator exploded out of the water and grabbed him. The area where the owner and dog were playing is a popular spot where the neighborhood children frequently play. Recently, beachgoers spotted an alligator swimming along the shore in Fort Myers. In April, a couple spotted an 8-9 foot gator in the surf at St. George Island, Florida. Living here, you always have to assume there is the possibility of a gator in any body of water.

Alligator attacks are rare in Florida, however, Fish and Wildlife warns everyone to be vigilant. The majority of the alligators we see in Magnolia Point are just passing through. There's nothing to fear as long as you respect their space. Never feed or approach them. Only photograph them if you can do so at a safe distance.

Some have said not to give out the locations of these creatures. I have to disagree with that

logic. Not only do you need to know where they could be, more importantly, you should know where they are. Please, keep your dogs out of our ponds. A few years ago, we had an alligator that was approximately 10 feet living in the big pond behind our house. I watched as an older couple allowed their dog to play in the water while they took pictures. They were new to Florida and had no idea they were offering Fluffy as the special of the day.



If your children fish in our ponds, no matter their age, please talk to them about the possibility of encountering an alligator. I've seen teenagers standing, barefoot, in the lake while fishing. Those pale feet, wiggling around, can be mistaken for a fish. Sometimes the water is murky and I've watched the gators explode out of the depths on more than one occasion. It only takes a second for a tragedy to occur. Discuss what to do in the event they hook one on their line. Wrapping your hand around the fishing line and pulling is a bad idea. Don't laugh, I've seen a child do this in my backyard!

It's a third degree felony, under Florida law to kill or injure an alligator. It's also illegal to feed them. If you have one in your pond that becomes aggressive or loses its fear of humans, contact the Florida Fish and Wildlife alligator nuisance hotline at 866-392-4286. The alligator will be removed if it is at least 4 feet in length and poses a nuisance to people, pets or property. Keep in mind, the alligator will be killed by a licensed trapper. They are not relocated, so please, only call if you feel you or your pets are threatened.

TUESDAY - GATOR #2 (SAME POND AS GATOR #1)

