



Brunswick Wildlife Gators

Brunswick County is the home of many reptiles. We have almost as many reptiles as we have mosquitoes or pickup trucks. You may not believe the truck comparison unless, of course, you drive anywhere on US 17 during Friday afternoon's rush hour.

Development impacts reptile populations and many species are decreasing due to loss of habitat. The number of American Alligators (*Alligator mississippiensis*), however, is increasing because people keep building neat retention ponds for them. Just kidding...the increase is a result of protection under the Endangered Species Act.

The American Alligator is the only crocodylian native to the Carolinas. Its range includes the coastal plain of the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts, from the Albemarle Sound in North Carolina and to southern Texas.

The alligator population, decimated by hunting, has almost fully recovered and they are no longer listed as endangered. They are, however, still protected as a threatened species in North Carolina. It may seem that every retention pond has its own gator but that is a result of more gators, more people to find them, and shrinking natural habitats.

According to David Allen of The North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC), "It is clear that the population has increased throughout the last half of the twentieth century because reports of alligators in the 1960's and 1970's were rare."

The NCWRC receives reports of nuisance alligators from the public and law enforcement. "In 1985 we had about 280 reports of alligators in the state. By 1999 we had about 325 reports or complaints, so it does appear the number of alligators are still increasing".

The number of reports serves as a proxy for the total number of alligators in the state, estimated to be in the low thousands. In recent years, most alligator technical guidance and relocation assistance has been furnished by private, licensed professionals; therefore, the NCWRC does not have complete data for this period. The effect of having more people around to make complaints also makes it difficult estimate the true increase in alligators.

If you're not a Florida Gator, you must be gator bait! Oops...I lost control of my keyboard...forgive me, it's football season.

Before returning to my native North Carolina coast, I lived in Gainesville for ten years...among the alligators. On one of several wildlife walks I led on Payne's Prairie near Gainesville, twelve birders followed me down a dike that had dozens of gators on each side.

It was not nesting season and I knew that gators will generally not, unless provoked, attack upright adults because they respect height and weight. Besides, we never came within fifteen feet of one. At home later in the afternoon, I suffered a major case of the willies. What had I done?!

From the 1950's through 2005, 376 attacks were reported with only 14 fatalities. Florida accounted for approximately 89% while North Carolina only had one documented attack. Approximately 60% of the attacks involved humans attempting to capture or handle alligators (17%), swimming, fishing, retrieving golf balls, snorkeling, or wading in water.

Be smarter than me. Stay back from gators and do not feed or harass them. Small children are very vulnerable and gators are infamous for taking pets...so do not allow either to swim in or play around the edge of water having the slightest possibility of alligator presence.

Due to the factors mentioned above, human/alligator encounters will continue to increase. Please report incidents to the NCWRC or local law enforcement.

If you feel an overwhelming need to watch a gator feeding frenzy, attend one of the showings at the NC Aquarium at Fort Fisher or, for the really hard core, visit a Florida alligator farm. If you feed a wild alligator, it may cost someone an arm or a leg...or worse.

Great sites to safely observe alligators swimming or sunning on the bank are the Twin Lakes at Sunset Beach. The town has recently removed some of the larger, more aggressive gators making it even safer. Another good site is Orton Pond where these photos were taken. Between the main Orton Plantation entrance and Brunswick Town there is a pullover where you can observe them on the pond.

If you go, stay back from the edge and honor the other precautions noted above. If alligators seem the slightest bit aggressive, leave immediately because it probably means people have been feeding them. Of course, the safest observation location is inside your vehicle.

John Ennis

Information on alligator attacks was derived from research by Ricky Langley, MD, MPH, NC Department of Health and Human Services, as reported in the journal Wilderness and Environmental Medicine.

