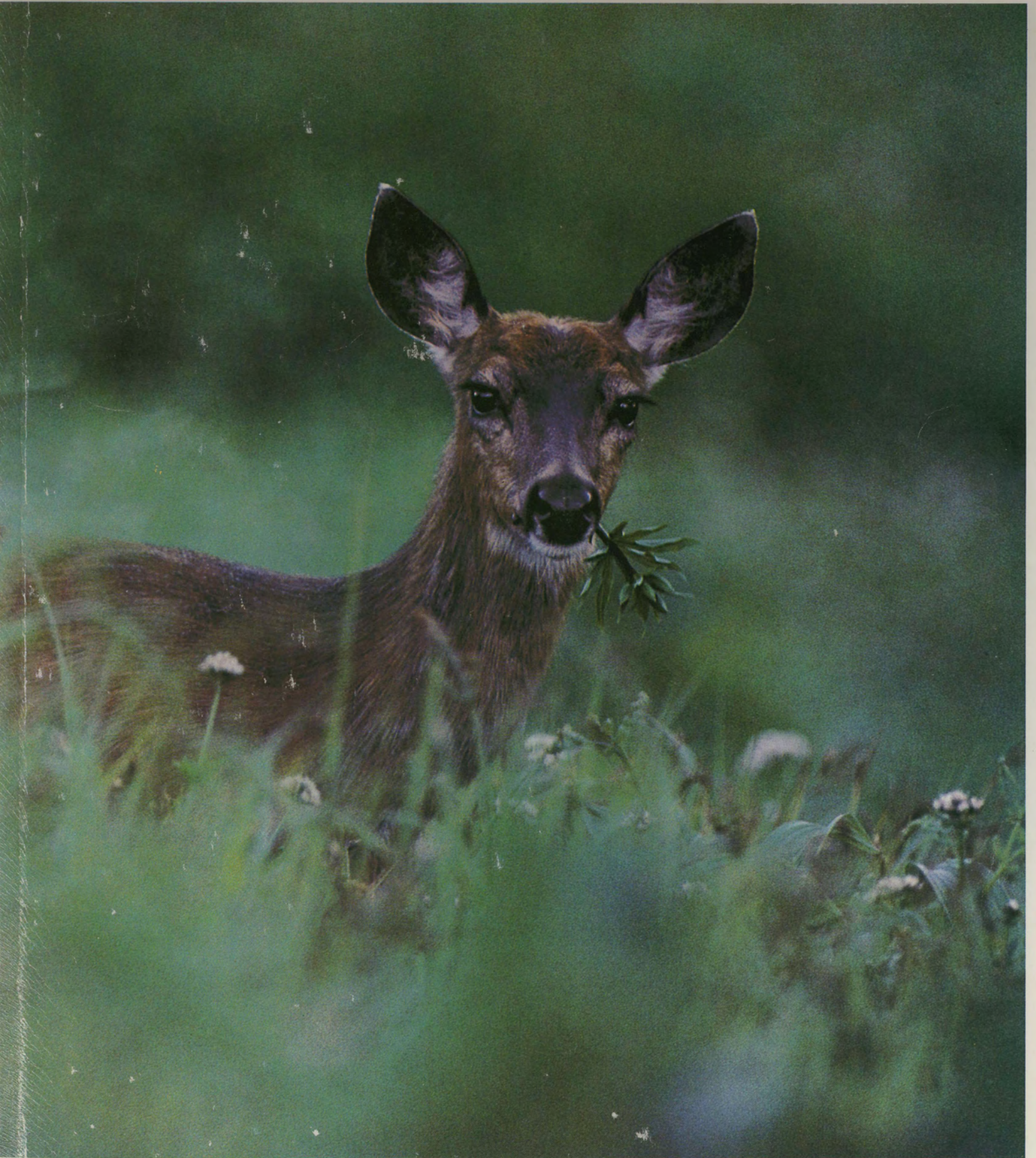


# AUDUBON

July Nineteen Eighty-Two • Three Dollars

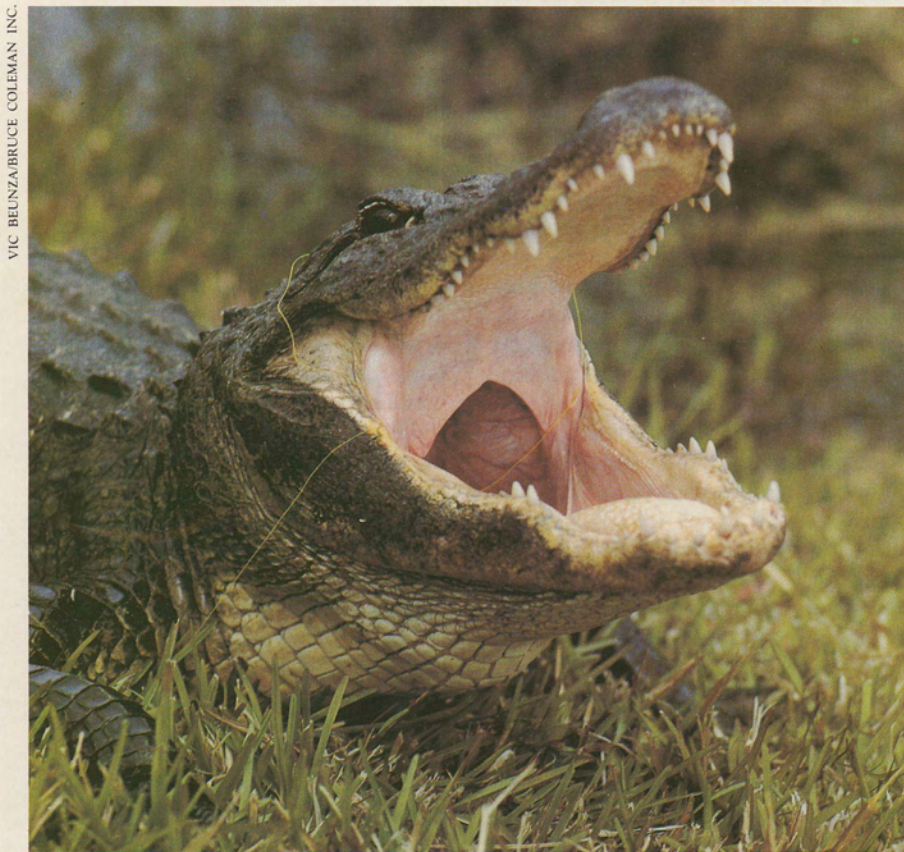
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## Master of My Lake

JACK RUDLOE



VIC BEUNZABRUCE COLEMAN, INC.

**M**EGAN . . . COME, MEGAN . . . MEEGAAN!"

My screams burst through the still morning air in desperation and disbelief.

An enormous alligator had rounded the curve of the lakeshore and was bearing down on my Airedale. The cold, yellowish eyes, gliding just above the opaque water of Otter Lake, were fixed on Megan, my companion, my friend for the past three years.

Never had I seen a living creature move so fast, with such overtly grim determination. As the beast sped into the shallows, I could see the ugly white spikes of teeth protruding from its crooked, wavy jaws.

Megan was almost out of the water, swimming to me with a bewildered expression, unaware of the danger closing from behind her in the lake where she swam almost every morning after a three-mile run with me.

Megan's feet hit the bottom.

*She's going to escape.*

I felt hope, joy. But the black, plated head put on a horrible burst of speed.

More and more of the knobby, black body emerged from the eighteen inches of tannin brown water. There seemed to be no end to it.

"No! No! No!" I screamed and rushed forward, somehow hoping to frighten it away, but the reptile couldn't care less. Its attention was fixed on Megan with cold intensity. With an explosion of water, it lunged upward, rearing above my dog almost as tall as a man, its front webbed claws spread menacingly apart. Time seemed to freeze—it was as if *Tyrannosaurus rex* had come to life.

Megan's confusion was transformed to terror. From somewhere inside the reptile came a hissing like a super-heated steam boiler. The hissing became a thunderous, unearthly roar as the alligator struck, clamping its tooth-studded jaws on my pet. Crashing back into the water, it twisted and rolled, driving her down into the mud and weeds.

*It's killing Megan . . . My dog . . . My friend!*

Something snapped in my brain. I have to do something—make it let go,

intimidate the thing into forgetting its prey. Adrenalin surged through me. With a cry of rage, of fear, of instinct, I found myself running and leaping through the air onto the back of the thing attacking my dog.

Megan and I had been swimming at the lake for two years and had never been bothered by alligators. They were there sometimes, I knew. I had seen them—shy, wild alligators that sank out of sight when approached by humans.

Where this one had come from, or why it attacked, I didn't know. Perhaps it had been hanging around the boat ramp and picnic area on the far end of the lake where weekenders fed it fish heads until it became "tame" and lost all fear of man. But the water had been low, fishing was bad in the scorching July doldrums, and people stopped coming. The handouts dried up.

There was no telling how long the alligator had waited at the landing, a mile from its normal haunt. How many days had it watched us, its bulbous eyes raised just above the dark amber waters, not causing a ripple, measuring each of us against its growing hunger?

Otter Lake was one of my favorite places. Hidden away in north Florida's wilderness, it was a retreat from technology, telephones, doorbells, and monthly bills. When I got tired of sitting at the typewriter in the broiling hot summer, the cool waters of the two-hundred-acre lake always welcomed me and my dog. Towering cypresses with gnarled roots and fat buttresses rose high above the water, their tops lacy with green needles in summer, vivid orange after the first frost, and barren, skeletal, and silver-gray in winter. When it was too cold to swim, I came just to look at the great water oaks with their Spanish-moss-draped branches and green resurrection ferns.

But now the dark water exploded and cascaded as the alligator slapped its tail. I slid over its plates and bumps, groping for a hold on its huge back. I felt numbing pain in my chest as my chin jammed into the ridged back.

*My God! What a colossal beast! You're actually on the back of an enormous alli-*



gator! It must be ten, twelve feet long.

It was alien, bony to the touch, almost dry, not slimy. There wasn't an inch of give in that rigid, armored back. As I struggled with every bit of my muscle to throw it off Megan, it swelled with air, making the hard-plated scales that normally lay flat rise upward. The thing was suddenly bristling with bony spikes.

Ignoring me, the alligator surged forward and got an even better grip on Megan, who all but disappeared inside the horrid maw. My hands groped the soft underside of the monster's throat and felt the beaded leather and scales that are made into belts and purses. It was almost flabby.

The tail slapped again. Water exploded.

*Keep clear of the tail, it can break your leg!*

I was a puny, hairless ape trying barehandedly to take on an armored, scaly dinosaur. Every inch of the brute was designed for survival and battle; the only weapon I possessed was a mouthful of ineffectual little teeth. No wonder our species invented sharpened stones!

I hung on, desperately clinging, and tried with all my strength to turn the murderous animal, to keep it from plunging into the sunless, deep waters.

*I've got to force it up on land.*

My hands groped along its back, and

up to its mouth, right where its toothy smile hinged. At least here was a handle of sorts. But it was no more than a skull covered with leather. There was no flesh, no give.

I got a good grip, dug my knees into the sand and yanked upward. The steel-trap jaws wouldn't yield. I sensed them shutting down harder, squeezing life and breath out of my Megan. I saw a flowing trail of bubbles.

*If only I had a weapon. A knife!*

*She's drowning—I'm running out of time!*

Again and again I dug in and pulled up on its upper jaw, but nothing I could do distracted it from its single awesome purpose. Fortunately for me, the saurian's only intent was to drag its prey down into the lake and drown it. Its small reptilian brain was able to focus on that and that alone. I was only a hindrance, not an alternative.

I felt my knees dragging through the weeds on the sandy bottom as the alligator pushed inexorably back into the water. I cursed myself for being out of shape from all the hours spent at the typewriter.

With all my might, I slammed my fist down between its eyes, again and again. The only result was pain in my hands. It was like pounding a fencepost. Time, depth, and distance worked against me as the alligator dragged Megan further out into the water. I was losing the territorial battle of terra firma versus the watery world.

*The alligator is going to win. It's going to carry Megan into the depths and eat*

*her. It's too strong, I'm going to lose. I won't lose!*

Desperately I threw my one hundred seventy pounds into manhandling it, trying to turn it back into my world. For a second, hope returned. I succeeded. The beast did turn. But just for a moment. Then it lifted me up, swung around, and continued on its course.

*The eyes . . . go for the eyes.*

My fingers worked their way over the unyielding leather-clad skull. I found its eyes, but the two sets of eyelids, one membranous and the other a thick leathery cover, closed, automatically sealing off the alligator's only vulnerable spot. Tightly closed, they weren't soft and yielding. They felt like mechanical ball joints on a car. With all my might I jammed my thumbs down, but it was futile, as if I were jamming my thumbs against hard-rubber handballs.

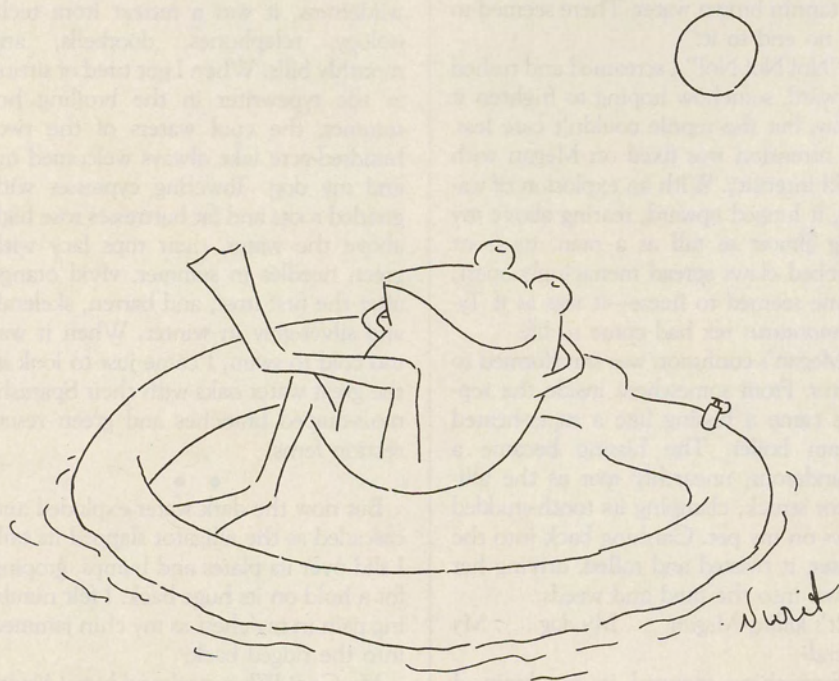
All my eye-gouging succeeded in doing was making the alligator swim faster. Black water closed over my head; the bottom was now sloping off quickly, and the beast had water beneath it. Any advantage I had was gone. Now it was rapidly entering its own world, and for me it was no longer a battle of land versus water; it was one of oxygen versus the abyss.

I managed to force the alligator up and get my head up for one hard gulp of air before being pulled back down. Again I drove my thumbs into the brute's eyes. By now I knew that my efforts to save Megan were futile. Even if by some miracle I could free her, and she weren't already dead, how could she survive having had her bones crushed and lungs punctured by eighty inch-long spiked teeth?

But I couldn't make myself let go. Again I tried to angle the alligator upward, directing its movement, using its own momentum the way you do when riding a sea turtle. But the water was too deep. And an alligator isn't a sea turtle. Its long tail swept back and forth, sculling it forward. I was towed rapidly out into the middle of the lake.

Once more I got the alligator to the surface long enough to grab another breath; and then we were going down again. Down into the lightless swamp water. I was exhausted, my lungs were bursting. No longer could I see any sign of Megan. My vision was limited to less than a foot—just enough to make out the alligator's coat of mail.

As the light disappeared I felt new fear. I would soon be out in the middle of the lake in twenty or thirty feet of water. The monster might slap me with





its tail, drop Megan, and turn on me. The very fury of this primitive battle, the splashing, might draw and excite other hungry alligators. The fear closed over me—fear for myself.

I couldn't hold on any longer. Despairingly I let go and watched its plated trunk churning beneath me into the gloom. It went on and on and on, like a freight train. I saw the rear webbed feet, churning one after the other, and then the narrow, undulating tail with its pale underside flashing. I could not see Megan; I would never see her again.

I boiled up to the surface, erupted into the daylight, filling my lungs with air. When I could breathe again I let out the mindless despairing cry of a wounded animal. My arms and legs thrashed through the water as I headed toward the cypresses and beautiful oaks with their long twisted branches. Finally, hard sand grated beneath my knees; I scabbled up on the shoreline, crying and yelling incoherently.

In horror, I turned and looked at the empty lake. It had swallowed up all signs of disturbance. Its calm waters mirrored blue sky, stacks of white puffy clouds, and moss-draped oaks. An osprey winged its way across the sky, calling its high-pitched chirp. It was as if nothing had happened.

I fled to my car, wanting to get out of there quickly, to leave it all behind me.

I felt betrayed, assaulted, robbed. I sped over the sandy jeep trail, through the palmetto, bouncing over ruts and dips, scratching paint on scrub oak branches, until I spun out onto the highway and raced toward home, still screaming.

*Why are you screaming? There's nothing you can do. Control yourself.*

**F**OR DAYS I REMAINED shaken and depressed. I had fought with everything I had and lost. I missed Megan terribly. I kept seeing her golden shaggy face looking at me in bewilderment as I urged her out of the lake. Over and over again, in my mind's eye, that big black head closed in on her. Slowly, from the bruises and scratches and pains in my body, I reconstructed what had happened. The long linear scrapes on my chest had to have come from the alligator's dorsal bumps, the bruises on my ribs and belly were from its thrashing back and forth. The aches in my thighs were from straddling it with a scissor's grip.

"You sure loved your dog all right," my neighbor said incredulously, "but you didn't give a damn about old Jack! People have been hand-feeding that gator all summer until he about crawled up the boat ramp begging food. That's not the first dog he ate. Someone ought to call the game commission and have him shot before he grabs some young 'un."

I was glad to be alive. Jogging along the sandy roads alone, in the following days, I thought a lot about alligators.

Fifteen years ago they were nowhere to be seen, hunted to the brink of extinction. Poachers roamed the swamps in small boats, catching those eerie red eyes in their light beam and blasting or clubbing away. Warehouses from Perry, Florida, and Waycross, Georgia, to Newark, New Jersey, were overflowing with illegally taken hides.

Then, in 1970, the U.S. Endangered Species Act banned the international sale of hides and alligator products. Florida passed a similar law, and the market dried up. Large-scale poaching stopped, and the alligator began to recover.

While alligators were increasing their numbers, the human population also swelled in Florida. As dredges sucked up the swamps and turned them into shopping centers and canals, the alligators were driven from their sawgrass and river-swamp homes. But they adapted, taking up residence in golf course ponds, marina basins, and canals. The Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission has found gator nests in people's backyards and chased ten-footers out of carpools. In the past ten years there have been three fatal attacks on humans and twenty-two maulings.

In 1978, Florida instituted the Nuisance Alligator Control Program. When someone complains that an aggressive alligator has moved into a backyard, canal, or lake, the state investigates.

If the reptile is deemed a threat, a licensed alligator hunter will be sent to kill it. The game commission auctions off the hides. The hunter, often an ex-poacher, is given 70 percent of the proceeds and is free to sell the tail meat—which tastes something like veal—to restaurants.

Not surprisingly, the game commission now regards alligators as a renewable resource, according to wildlife resources chief Thomas Goodwin.

In 1981, it again became legal to sell alligator products such as purses, belts, and shoes in Florida. State officials claim they can control the market by a complex system of tagging hides and packaging the meat, but the number of poaching violations has more than doubled since 1978.

Archie Carr of the University of Florida strenuously objects to the commercialization of alligators: "Once you open the marketplace and build up the demand for hides, you're dooming alligators and other rarer species of crocodiles to extinction. Overseas the demand for hides is insatiable. This just encourages the worldwide sale of other crocodilian species, most of which are nearly extinct." Then he added, "Ag-



MARK FORD



gressive alligators should be shot or carted off but not offered for sale. The state is using the few attacks on humans and the attacks on dogs as ammunition to open up wholesale commercial exploitation. We're going back to the 1940s when you could drive the whole Tamiami Trail and never see an alligator."

The problems of alligator protection are both complex and confusing, and I found myself torn. I couldn't stand the idea of seeing a reptile that has survived unchanged for the past sixty million years exterminated. They are the last of the dinosaurs. Paleontologists have unearthed six-foot-long skulls with six-inch teeth from crocodylians that may have measured forty-five feet long.

But the lake would never be the same for me. I shuddered when I thought that in the very spot where Megan was attacked we had taken our ten-month-old baby swimming.

Again and again I dreamed of the fight, only this time I had a sharp knife. I could stab it over and over into the alligator's corpulent belly and its throat. I could hurt it, make it feel pain. Ex-alligator poachers had told me about the spot in the back of its head where a single stab would kill it instantly, cutting

through the spinal column. In my dreams I had a chance.

But those dreams were inconsistent with everything I had worked for. I had been involved in environmental causes for the past twenty years, trying to save blue herons, turtles, and alligators from man's technology, and perhaps in so doing to save ourselves. I knew the importance of these ancient beasts. Without them there would be an overabundance of less desirable fish, like garfish and bowfin, that feed on bass, crappie, and sunfish. Most important, during summer droughts, when swamps are parched and dry, gator holes often become the only source of water for everything from deer to wading birds. Without them the swamp would be a poorer place.

It was three weeks before I returned to Otter Lake and looked out over its placid waters. There was no sign of the alligator, so my wife and I launched our canoe. I wanted to see the alligator again, to begin healing the mental wound it had inflicted, to banish the nightmares. If possible I wanted to restore it to its proper place as a living, flesh-and-blood animal.

We were still close to the landing when suddenly there was an explosive

splash; a swirl of water, and there it was—aggressive and brazen. It didn't sink out of sight as we approached but surged ahead away from our canoe, throwing a wake as it crossed our bow. For a moment the hatred and fear returned. I wanted nothing more than revenge—to blast that thing forever to kingdom come.

Before I rode that terrifying beast out into Otter Lake, as it clutched my dog in its jaws, I would have been able to view the whole thing objectively. But now I had been affected personally. Whether I would ever swim in that lake again I couldn't say.

Sitting in the canoe, I watched the new master of my lake move out into the middle and then slowly sink down into the depths. I was hot; the August sun burned down into my back. I wanted to swim in the cool water, but somehow I couldn't bring myself to do it.

The alligator surfaced again and looked at us boldly. It was just a matter of time. He was too bold. If not this year, then next year he would be destroyed as the nuisance alligator he had become. And when that happened—even though he had dragged me through hell and killed the dog I loved—it would be a tragedy. ♠

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