

GOOD WORDS FOR THE GATOR

Science Finds Him to Be a Useful Citizen of the South.

HIS KIND ALMOST WIPED OUT

Little Evidence Back of These Old Scandals About His Appetite, but His Hide, Commercially Considered, is Valuable.

A visitor to that part of the south below North Carolina could see alligators in almost every stream and bayou twenty years ago, but now one may frequently spend months traveling through this region and not see a single alligator except those in captivity. The killing of the creatures for sport or for their hides has been the main cause of their great decrease in numbers. In addition thousands of the young have been killed or shipped away, while enormous numbers of the eggs have been gathered and sold as curios.

It was not until about 1855 that the demand for alligator leather became of importance. The market was not long continued. In 1860 fashion again called for the leather for manufacturing into fancy slippers, traveling bags, belts, card cases, music rolls, etc. The demand has continued to the present and many thousands of the animals have been killed, while the preparation of the skins has given employment to hundreds of people.

The output of the tanneries of this country approximates 275,000 skins annually, worth about \$45,000, part of which come from Mexico and Central America. It is estimated that about 3,000,000 alligators were killed in Florida between 1850 and 1890, nearly 20,000 being killed in 1908.

Once Very Abundant. The earliest settlers in the southern states found alligators, or as they were then called, crocodiles, exceedingly abundant in almost all streams, especially in Florida and Louisiana. Many marvelous tales are found in the early chronicles of the ravages of these monsters. They were said to eat dogs and pigs and to consider the negro an especially succulent titbit, while it was considered dangerous to go into streams where they were known to exist. When such a stream had to be crossed hours were spent sometimes in beating it to frighten off the alligators.

The researches of scientists have shown that there is very slight foundation for such stories, and it is probable that the greater number of the pigs lost by the planters could have been traced to other enemies, particularly two-footed ones, while runaway slaves would naturally encourage the belief that alligators had dined off them.

The greater part of the supply of alligator leather now comes from Florida and owing to excessive hunting the industry is profitable only in the central part of the peninsula, in what is called the Lake Okechobee region and in the Everglades. Here the principal hunters are Seminole Indians who have their homes on hammocks far back in the Everglades, and come to the settlements only when in need of articles which they cannot produce themselves.

Gators Most Active at Night. The alligator is most active at night and its days are usually spent lying on some low bank or log overhanging the water, where it can enjoy the warmth of the sun and be able to retreat to its native element at the first sign of danger. While on land alligators are very clumsy, in the water they are exceedingly active, and being strong swimmers are able to catch the larger fish with but little trouble. For animals like the muskrat and other swimming across lagoons they are always to be watched.

On seeing its prey the alligator sinks into the water and there it remains until all struggling has ceased; it is then able with less trouble to tear into pieces. While thus submerged a peculiar collar at the base of the tongue prevents the water from passing into its lungs.

While the alligator is said to make very effective use of its tail in warfare the widely disseminated story that it uses its tail to sweep animals off the banks into its jaws appears to have but slight foundation.

The mother alligator in April or May seeks a sheltered spot on a bank and there builds a small mound with a hole in the center. The foundation of this mound is of mud and grass and on these she lays some eggs. She then covers the eggs with other stratum of grass and mud, upon which she deposits some more eggs. Thus she proceeds until she has laid from twenty-five to sixty eggs. The eggs are hatched out by the sun.

Papa Alligator a Cannibal. As soon as they have chipped the shell the baby alligators are led to the water by the mother, who provides them with food which she disgorges. Papa Alligator has to be carefully watched at this time, for he highly esteems a dinner of young saurians and is not particular whether they are his own or his neighbor's children. When by strategy or downright fighting the mother has got her family safely into their natural element it is not long before the young scatter, each to begin life on his own hook. At this period they form a favorite food for turtles and the larger fishes.

When fully grown the alligator is about sixteen feet in length. In the adult stage it is greenish black above, having lost the yellowish color bands that belong to its earlier years. Hunters say that alligators grow very slowly, attaining the first year's length of about one foot. When two feet in length they are said to be from ten to fifteen years old, while those twelve feet long are supposed to be 75 or more. Their normal life is estimated at from 100 to 150 years.

Alligator hunting originally began as sport. Then some one tanned the skin and found that it could be put to commercial use. Carried on, as it must be, at night, the hunt is picturesque.

In many cases the hunters fasten bicycle lamps on their caps, and when the animal is attracted by the light pick it off by hitting it in the eye with a rifle ball. Torches are often used. Some times the hunter uses the lights and for an instant the water by "telescoping" to the gator," as it is called.

Baby Gators are Bait. An alligator is always attracted by the peculiar grunt which the young alligators make, for there is no sort of food they love better than newly hatched gators. The hunter takes a long slender pole and lets one end of it down very quietly into the water. The other end he places between his teeth and imitates the grunt of the baby gator. The old fellow scaly hears the call and comes up to feast on the babies they think are there.

In catching them alive hunters frequently leave them alone, unless on the bank or on a log. When asleep in their holes in the mud they are occasionally drawn out by means of an iron hook. These holes are easily found. Some times the grass is set afire, and the animals, as they founder toward the water. After the alligator is caught the hunter in sport some times mounts it, using the

AERIAL FLEETS OF GERMANY

Alarm Felt in England Over the Building of Zeppelins.

ENGLAND IS LAGGING BEHIND

Airships that Might Make Short Work of Dreadnoughts, Though Some Experts Hold Opinion of Aerial Attack.

LONDON, April 16.—Before the British public has had time to recover from the scare caused by the revelation that in 1912 Germany will have a mighty dreadnought fleet, the Great Britain, the most powerful of the Times raises a fresh alarm by announcing that Germany in the same year will be in possession of more than enough airships to make short work of at least ten British Dreadnoughts. In 1912, we are told, Germany will have twenty-four mammoth Zeppelin ships, each capable of overseas excursions and probably swifter than any naval vessel. In the present year they will have four Zeppelins, and the magnificent factory at Friedrichshafen, endowed with over \$1,000,000 by the German nation, will be able to turn out at least eight vessels a year after this autumn. Thus by 1912 Germany can have twenty-four Zeppelins and her other military dirigibles will number at least a dozen.

Great Britain has no up-to-date facilities for building large dirigibles and the rate of production is one vessel a year. By 1912 Britain may have at most some five small, slow non-rigid ships, which, as compared with the Zeppelins, are being antiquated by the latest Zeppelins, and these five ships, if built according to present estimates, will be fitted only for overland work. They will be quite unable to cope with the larger and swifter German vessels, which can mount better guns and carry more explosives.

What Zeppelin Can Do. A Zeppelin of the present day type, continues the writer, carries its engine in ten hours and does enormous damage in a brief space of time. Twenty-four great vessels of a vastly improved type might in 1912 put ten or more British Dreadnoughts out of action and damage Great Britain's naval bases seriously, while Germany would still have a well tried second aerial fleet of smaller dirigibles to carry out further operations.

At least three highly equipped factories in Germany are now making dirigibles, and Count Zeppelin alone has \$1,500,000 for the work, of which \$1,275,000 was subscribed by the German people of their own free will.

The writer therefore exhorts the English people to rouse themselves from their lethargy and carry out a similar national movement. By a combined effort, he says, aided by the naval and military authorities, Britain could by 1912 have twelve large and well equipped aerial vessels, in addition to the five or more which the government would construct.

He points out, however, that Germany years of well organized preparation and the expenditure of over \$5,000,000 to attain her present aerial position and that it is absurd to hope that the annual outlay of \$500,000 by Britain can bring it out of the purely experimental stage by 1912.

Speaking of the moral effect of a sudden attack on these shores by Germany, he predicts that a panic would be created by a single German ship making a demonstration over London. The majority of people in this country, he says, laugh at the idea, and even aeronautical writers pool-pool the possibility of attack by dirigibles, and yet the records made by the Zeppelin in 1908 show that a ship of this type, traveling over 300 miles, and later records show its speed to be up to thirty-five miles an hour, with power to ascend to an altitude of over a mile.

It can carry at least a ton of explosives and sufficient supplies for a run of over 600 miles. Yet the notion of aerial attack by dirigibles of the Zeppelin type is ridiculed in this country.

Landing Army by Airship. The arguments of the aeronautical experts referred to who pool-pool the idea of attacks on Britain by German dirigibles are put thus by one of them: Granted ideal conditions, an entire absence of fog or rain for something over twenty-four hours and still a light easterly breeze, a Zeppelin airship might carry men with food and rifles across the North Sea. Under these circumstances it is, of course, conceivable that an invading army of 20,000 might be landed in this country; but the cost to the invader for airship construction, if it is asserted, would be roughly \$500,000,000.

One of the greatest obstacles to the successful crossing of the North Sea by a Zeppelin would be the pressure of atmospheric moisture. The horizontal section of the envelope exposes a surface of nearly half an acre, and it is stated that the heaviest shower falling on that half acre must weigh the heavily loaded vessel to the earth, and not only that, but the airship, carrying the load assumed, cannot even pass through a cloud of heavy mist.

The reserve of buoyancy is something over ten hundred weight, made up of ballast. If the vessel enters a mist water settles quickly on the one and a half acres of enveloping surface. Even if the ballast were thrown overboard a sum of water one two hundred and a fifth of an inch in thickness would be sufficient to bring the vessel down.

German Feel Like Rejoicing. The German military and naval authorities are rejoicing over the latest flight of the Zeppelin I, which on March 9 ascended with twenty-five passengers and manœvered for nearly four hours over a total distance of some 120 miles. The greatest number of persons ever carried in any of the Zeppelin vessels before had been sixteen, but the extra weight did not impede the airship's progress or make it more difficult to handle.

The German authorities consider this latest flight to be of immense value from a strategic point of view, and regard it as bringing much nearer than before the practicality of the Zeppelin as a transport for troops. The weight carried also proved that an equal burden in the shape of artillery or ammunition can be transported with equal ease.

Prince Henry of Prussia, however, does not share the view that the Zeppelin at present can be looked upon as a weapon of war. Extracts from a lecture delivered by the prince a few days ago at the Marine academy of Kiel, in which he described his trip in the Zeppelin, were cabled to the Bee at the time.

Among other things he referred to the vessel's sensibility to changes of equilibrium, despite its enormous size. This was shown by the fact that if members of the crew had to be changed from the car at one end of the balloon to the car at the other, they had to leave the cars simultaneously and raise each other exactly in the middle of the covered connecting gangway. Objections Pointed Out. He regarded the problem of reaching a

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JANUARY 1, 1909

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