

Do Not Feed or Fear the Gators in Texomaland

I feel the pull to set the record straight on alligators and humans living on Lake Texoma. The fact is that Texans and Okies on both sides of the Red River have been sharing Lake Texoma with gators for years. Arklatexans, Louisianans, and east Texans plus Americans across the southeastern U.S. have been sharing their waterways with gators for centuries. Gators even live around the Trinity River in Dallas.

In the past two years, I heard two children screaming their fears to their parents about alligators at Sherwood Shores beach. Those children who screamed in fear made me realize that mainstream media encouraged those fears. I have heard of people who are feeding the gators. Texomans and our visitors can understand how to teach themselves and their children about alligator safety. We need to be aware of the precautions that we need to take concerning the low percentage of rare alligator encounters on Lake Texoma and its surrounding waterways. Those are the reasons for this article.

DO NOT FEED THE ALLIGATORS! Why?

Do not feed alligators, EVER! It is illegal for an extremely logical reason based on centuries of knowledge from the folks who live in east Texas, southwestern Arkansas, Louisiana, and Florida. Why? Gators instinctively fear humans and will not normally attack people. If only one person feeds a single gator, it poses a future threat to humans and opens up a new gateway to the property near the feeding location to children, pets, deer, cattle, other livestock and other wildlife because the gators become acclimated to human interaction, lose their fear, and hunt the new grounds. Once a gator knows that he or she can receive food from a human, it grows bolder because it associates people with food.

“If you walk near the water and an alligator comes straight toward you, and especially if it comes out of the water, report it to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD). It may be an alligator that a human has been feeding.”

“Wild animals, such as alligators, that lose their fear of humans, can become dangerous to the feeder as well as to the surrounding residents, resulting in a conflict that ends with the wildlife trapped and euthanized because of the perceived threat to the community. In addition, feeding wildlife encourages them to reproduce in greater numbers than the habitat can support. For all these reasons, and for the sake of long-term safety to the public and Texas wildlife, no one should intentionally feed alligators. If you observe someone else feeding alligators, please report them to the TPWD for the safety of all.”

Since October 1, 2003, it has been a Class C misdemeanor punishable by a fine of up to \$500 for anyone caught feeding an alligator in Texas. **



Why You Do Not Need to Be Afraid of Alligators on Lake Texoma

1. Alligators favor marshy areas like those found in Hagerman National Wildlife Refuge and Fobb Bottom. Lake Texoma marinas and many of its beaches, especially beaches which people frequently visit, are not attractive habitats for alligators. Numerous alligator sightings have occurred over the years in Fobb Bottom, so be aware in the marshy wetlands there. (I heard there was a gator farm in Fobb Bottom in the 1950s; no proof of it yet).
2. Alligator sightings are rare on Lake Texoma, and you have to be in the gator's preferred habitat to see them.
3. Alligators are naturally afraid of humans.

4. Serious and repeated attacks are most often made by alligators 8 feet in length or more and the result of chase and feeding behavior. Attacks by alligators under 5 feet in length are rare.

Some Alligator Precautions

DON'T let your pets swim or run along the shoreline of waters known to contain large alligators. Alligators could be attracted to dogs because they are about the same size as a large alligator's natural prey.

DON'T swim or allow pets to swim in areas with vegetation that is growing up out of the water. Alligators favor this type of habitat.

DON'T swim, walk dogs or small children at night or at dusk along the shoreline of waters that are known to contain large alligators. Large alligators feed most actively during the evening hours. This is one reason Florida has made it illegal to water-ski after dark.

ALLIGATORS have a natural fear of humans and usually begin a quick retreat when approached by people. If you have a close encounter with an alligator a few yards away, back away slowly. It is extremely rare for wild alligators to chase people. However, never make the mistake of thinking that an alligator is slow and lethargic. Alligators are extremely quick and agile and will defend themselves when cornered. A female protecting her nest might charge a person who gets close to her nest, but she will quickly return to the nest after the intruder leaves.

IT is not uncommon for alligators to bask along the banks of a pond or stream for extended periods of time. These alligators are usually warming their bodies; they are not actively hunting. Often times, a basking alligator may be seen with its mouth open; this is a way to cool its body temperature down, since alligators do not pant or sweat. An approaching human should cause these alligators to retreat into the water. (In some cases, the alligator may be protecting a nest). However, an alligator may be considered a nuisance if it leaves the banks of the water body to spend time near homes, livestock pens, or other structures.

IF you see an alligator while walking a pet make sure that your pet is on a leash and under your control. Your pet will naturally be curious, and the

alligator may see your pet as an easy food source. Alligators possess a keen sense of smell. In areas near alligator sightings, it is wise to keep pets inside a fenced area or in the house for a few days during which the alligator will move on.

IT is not uncommon for alligators to pursue top-water fishing lures, and this activity does not constitute a threat to humans. As with fish, alligators are attracted to these lures because they mimic natural food. Most alligators can be easily scared away from boats or fishing lures. However, alligators that repeatedly follow boats, canoes, or other watercraft, and/or maintain a close distance without submersing may be considered nuisance alligators.

IF you see a nuisance alligator, consider why it is there. Did someone clean fish and throw the heads into a pond or river? If so, they created a potential alligator problem and could be breaking state regulations. Since October 1, 2003, it has been a Class C misdemeanor punishable by a fine of up to \$500 for anyone caught feeding an alligator in Texas.

DO not throw fish scraps in the water or leave them on shore.

My Experience with Gators on the Caloosahatchee River

Thirty-eight years ago, I lived on the Caloosahatchee River in Florida 50 miles north of the Everglades official property line when gators were on the federal endangered list east of Fort Myers near LaBelle. The bank of that river sat 20 feet from the back door of my house. There were so many adult gators that were four or more feet long. I watched them run around almost in herds during the early morning and evening hours. I was young then, and I captured baby gators, fed them, put them on a leash for a few days, and walked them like a dog along with my dogs. Then, I released them back into the river because I knew that was where they needed to be in order to live a good gator life.

I swam in the Caloosahatchee River between the hours of 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. during the heat of the day with, I estimate, about a hundred adult gators within a mile. Randy Harrington, from east Texas, and I fished in an old, six-foot boat for dinner often at dusk when the gators hunted and the fish

bit real good! One evening, Randy told me to throw out the anchor. I did, and I went with it about 15 feet from the riverbank.

Randy yelled, "Swim to shore, NOW!" I looked behind one time, saw gator eyes approaching too quickly, and swam faster than I had ever swum before. When I climbed onto the bank, that gator was one foot away, and it slowly sank back into the river to search for more prey. There was nothing Randy could do to save me. He could not have caught up to me, and who knew how many other gators were in that same river space, so there was no reason for him to try. It was me and that gator, and, thank God, I won.

The gators on the Caloosahatchee River were aggressive and not afraid to attack humans in the water at feeding time. BUT! Those gators were not acclimated to humans feeding them. No one in Florida fed gators back then except those in the alligator tourist attraction businesses. Those Everglades' gators ate everything they could drag into the river. However, we lived with abundant gators in harmony there, and we do not need to fear them on Lake Texoma. Most of us will never see a gator.

On the Caloosahatchee River, our dogs only went outside during the heat of the day without leashes. I heard those gators barking to attract dogs every night because everyone who lived on the river owned dogs. The rest of the time, we walked our dogs on leashes like they lived in New York City.



Gator Facts

1. Feeding an alligator ultimately leads to its death.

2. An alligator can run on land as fast as a horse for one-quarter of a mile.
3. An alligator can bark like a dog, and it will hiss a warning if you venture too close to it.
4. An alligator hunts for food and feeds between dusk and dawn.
5. Below 60 degrees, alligators are less active and sometimes burrow into the ground.
6. You will usually see an alligator's eyes when it is in the water.
7. Female alligators lay their 15-60 eggs in June and July in mounded nests above ground and fiercely protect them. Nests average about two feet in height and five feet in diameter. A mama gator may charge a human that wanders too close to her egg nest, but she will retreat once the threat moves away.
8. Alligators do not become tame in captivity.
9. Deliberate feeding of alligators puts you, your pets, your neighbors, and wildlife at risk.
10. Alligators are timid and avoid humans whenever possible.
11. Alligators are a federally protected species.
12. In the past 20 years in Texas, legal protection, enhanced habitat conditions, and water impoundment projects have resulted in the rapid growth of alligator populations.

* I mined all of the information in this article from the links below and personal experience.

** The Oklahoma Wildlife Department of Conservation told me that it is illegal to throw fish scraps on the shore, but did not know of any state laws regarding feeding alligators. I am still checking on this.



Gator Links and Stories

Comprehensive Alligator Behavior and Habits Information

<http://oklahomawildlifecontrol.com/wildlife-info/alligator-camen/>

TPWD

<https://tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/park-information/alligator-safety>

How to Be Safe Around Alligators

<https://srelherp.uga.edu/alligators/alligator-safety.htm>

Old, Blind Lake Worth Alligator

<https://www.star-telegram.com/news/local/community/fort-worth/article88055692.html>

Cowboy Lassos Alligator Blocking Southeast Texas Highway

<https://www.dallasnews.com/news/animals/2018/04/30/cowboy-lassos-giant-alligator-blocking-southeast-texas-highway>

Army Corps Releases Photos of Alligators on Lake Texoma

<http://www.kxii.com/home/headlines/Gator-Country-Army-Corps-finds-alligators-on-Lake-Texoma-362719041.html>

Good Ole Gator Information

<http://www.dfwwildlife.org/alligator.html>