
Gator Season

The apparatus attached to Scott Couch's belt released a minute dose of morphine, which traveled down a tube implanted in his lower back to allow Couch to function with degenerative disc disease.



Scott Couch

From the look on his face last August, Couch certainly needed a little help. Actually, he needed a lot of help from his fellow alligator hunters, who were hooked up with a 262-pound, 10-foot, 2-inch gator that was not thrilled in the least to be impeded from his normal free rein in the Mobile-Tensaw Delta.

Despite his back disability, Couch, who lives in Auburn, is the one who applied and was drawn for one of the 100 permits issued for the Delta hunts. "I'm a photographer, so I couldn't pass up the chance to shoot an alligator hunt," said a grimacing Couch as he tried to hold the bowed fishing rod in one hand and his camera in the other. "I didn't know if I could do it, but I sure was going to try."

► **By David Rainer, Staff Writer
and Photography by Billy Pope**

Alligator hunting in Alabama takes place between the hours of 8 p.m. and 6 a.m. on dates approved by the Conservation Advisory Board. Currently the alligator season is only open in portions of Barbour, Mobile and Baldwin counties. Successful applicants must attend a training course before hunting. No use of bait is allowed.



Couch recruited two buddies from Stockton – David Steele and Shane Hall – to being his hunt assistants, and Shane spotted the gator in Tensaw River. David then made a cast with one of the saltwater fishing rigs they'd purchased the day of the hunt and snagged the gator with a snatch hook. Soon the other two were hooked up, as well. But there was no horsing this gator. They just hung on until the gator finally wore out.

"That was exhausting," Couch said after the gator was dispatched and secured inside the boat. "That was three hours of constant tension. I had grip fatigue and my back hurt. Actually, it was just general fatigue. When we first hooked him, he came up out of the water. His head must have been a foot out of the water and he hissed at us. At that point, I really didn't know what we'd gotten ourselves into. It just turned into a matter of will. It was a struggle of perseverance and give and take. But it was exhilarating. I'm definitely applying again."

Couch and his pals were one of 89 hunt teams that were successful last August during the two-weekend season in the Mobile-Tensaw Delta.

And the number of permits for the Delta hunt will likely expand again, this time to 125 permits. Lake Eufaula will again have 40 permits.

Overpopulation

The reason Alabama started the alligator seasons was simple – too many gators. "We get a lot of nuisance complaints in the Baldwin-Mobile County area," said Chuck Sharp of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources' Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division. "Up until a couple of years ago, our only recourse was to have them taken off by a nuisance control officer or deal with them ourselves."

"We petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and asked what their requirements were to establish an alligator season in Alabama, as opposed to having to deal with complaints as nuisance animals. Their process was relatively simple. We already had an Alabama alligator farming license set up through the Legislature, as well as a nuisance control regulation in place. Those were basically the two legal requirements



Scott Couch (center) with fellow hunters David Steele (left) and Shane Hall (right) moments after harvesting their gator, which weighed in at 262 pounds and a length of 10 feet, 2 inches.

the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service had for setting up an alligator season. In addition, Alabama Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries had to promulgate state rules and regulations to govern the hunt, continue the monitoring program already in place and provide the Service with an annual report on the hunts."

Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries proceeded cautiously setting up the alligator hunts to ensure that only the surplus of the population, which were at one time on the threatened or endangered species list, would be harvested.

"We haven't impacted the population significantly," said Sharp, supervising wildlife biologist for District V. "We started with 50 tags the first year, just to get our feet on the ground and make sure our methods were sound. The first year came and went safely. We had a high success rate with only minor cuts and scrapes. So for the second year for Mobile and Baldwin hunt, we decided to increase the available tags to 100. Based on our annual survey as compared to surveys conducted

Each hunter is given a tag which is required to be in their possession while they are hunting and must be attached to the alligator's tail as soon as it is harvested.

over the previous 10 years, no discernable decline in the number of alligators has been observed. Each year division personnel spotlight certain bays in the lower delta and count the number of alligators observed. We'll count anywhere from 600 to 1,000 alligators a year. We have not seen a measureable decrease since the seasons started.

"So we didn't feel like we were negatively impacting the population. Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries supports harvesting the surplus animals, but we maintain good biological data to ensure that we don't start to impact the future of the population."

Increased Permits

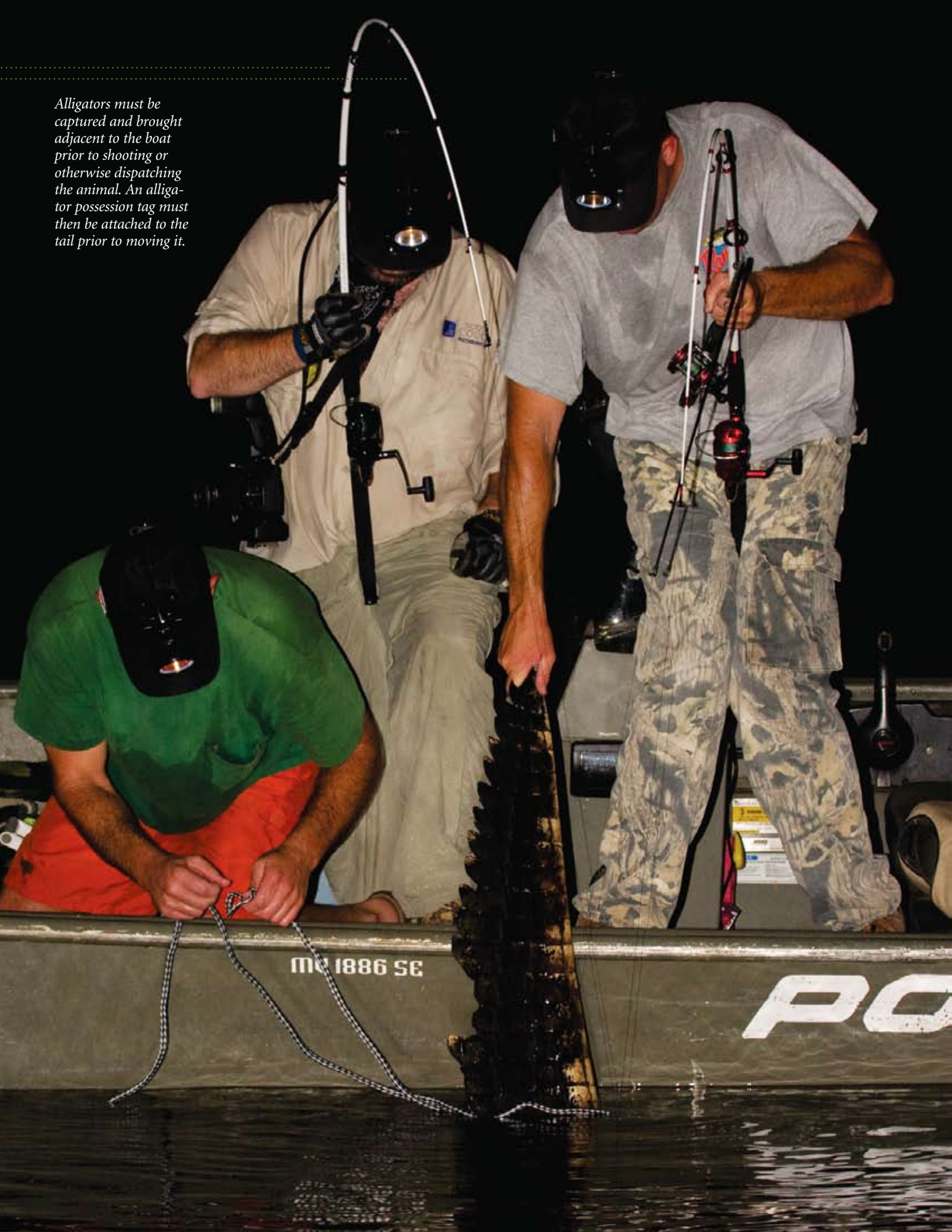
This year the number of permits for Mobile and Baldwin counties will increase to 125 and the boundary line north in Mobile and Baldwin County will be expanded north to Washington/Clarke/Monroe County lines.

Sharp said there also has been discussion about expanding the alligator season to other parts of the state, but WFF will proceed with caution about extending the boundaries. "We may, some day, move into other areas, say like Millers Ferry where there is plenty of alligator habitat," he said. "And, one day, we may end up like Georgia, where





Alligators must be captured and brought adjacent to the boat prior to shooting or otherwise dispatching the animal. An alligator possession tag must then be attached to the tail prior to moving it.



they open it up on a county-by-county basis. But right now, we still want to err on the side of being conservative.”

Although the minimum size allowed is 6 feet in total length, Sharp said the range of gators taken in 2007 varied significantly. “The mentality of some hunters nowadays is the bigger animal is the trophy,” he said. “But we are harvesting some of the smaller animals. The reality is that these hunters see these big gators and they don’t really want to tackle something that size. They’re primarily out there for the experience and enjoyment. We did take some big gators this past year, but we also took a good many in the 6- to 8-foot range, too. We do want to target the animals that are sexually mature, which helps us control the population a little better. If we take the non-breeders out, we’re not impacting the population nearly as effectively as we are if we’re taking the breeders out.”

Sharp said it is hard to determine if the hunts have lessened the number of nuisance complaints. “This area is still growing and they’re still developing around these wetland areas,” he said. “Because of the increase in human contact, we probably haven’t seen a decline in complaints. To be honest, the animals we are taking are usually not the nuisance animals. A lot of these gators come from the middle of the Delta where they are only seen by fishermen and boaters. Areas like Bay Minette Basin, when animals are taken out of there, it could have some affect on the number of nuisance calls in that area.”

Mandatory Training

Anyone lucky enough to be picked in the random drawing must attend a mandatory training class two weeks before the start of the first season. At class, instructors give the hunters a complete rundown of the rules and regulations and the boundary lines.

“We tell them what they can and can’t do, who can and can’t go with them, as well as the equipment they can use and any safety issues they might run into,” Sharp said. “We try to go through the different methods of capture. We go through each method. We tell them about using the correct ammunition for the shotgun or bang stick. We talk to them about what they do once they have the animal – how to secure it, how to tape its mouth and making sure it is dispatched. We talk about the safety issues, including getting the gator into close proximity and the correct way to dispatch the animal.



After completing the mandatory training two weeks prior to the hunt, Couch checks in and receives his group’s required information and tag.

“Everybody who comes down here is really a beginner because we’ve only had two seasons of hunting, so we don’t have a whole lot of experienced hunters,” Sharp said. “We provide a mandatory class and try to educate the hunters about the options they have. Those options are using a harpoon, archery fishing equipment, snatch hooks and/or a snare. Of those, a lot of people who show up at the class think they’ll be using bowfishing equipment. But the method that has proved to work about as well as anything during the last two seasons is the snatch hooks on heavy fishing equipment. They use a heavy rod and big treble hooks. It increases the range significantly over a harpoon or archery equipment.”

Before the fight is over, in most instances, hunters tend to use more than one method to subdue the gators, especially the bigger animals that are capable to biting holes in their boats. “They may use a snatch hook to get the gator up close enough to use a harpoon or a snare,” Sharp said. “Once you get that heavier line, you do get

more control over the animal. With fishing line, you can only put so much pressure on the gator. Once you get that harpoon or snare with steel cable, you can pretty much muscle them in then, but with fishing line, you’ve got to finesse them in when you’re looking at a 400-pound animal.”

During the 2007 hunts in the Mobile-Tensaw Delta, the largest gator taken was a 12-foot, 10-inch gator that weighed 641 pounds. A 12-foot gator taken at Eufaula was the heaviest taken in the state last year at 675 pounds.

“The hunters have been very pleased with the previous hunts, even the ones who aren’t successful, and that’s a very small percentage,” Sharp said. “They really enjoy the experience. Most of them admit it’s nothing like what they had expected. As far as I know, many of the hunters have re-applied and want to try it again. There’s a lot of satisfaction expressed by prior participants of the hunts. And most of the general public’s comments have been positive as well. We’ve had very little negative input about the hunt.” **GA**

Hunt Registration

Alabama residents age 16 years or older may apply for an Alligator Possession Tag. Apply online at www.outdooralabama.com through July 16, 2008. The cost is \$6 to apply and individuals may register multiple times. Hunters will be randomly chosen by computer to receive one Alligator Possession Tag. Tags are not transferable.

The first hunt in Mobile and Baldwin counties starts at 8 p.m. Aug. 15 and ends at 6 a.m. Aug. 18. The second Delta hunt begins at 8 p.m. Aug. 22 and ends at 6 a.m. Aug. 25. The Eufaula hunt starts at 8 p.m. Aug. 21 and ends at 6 a.m. Aug. 24.