



Gator among the biggest ever killed in Texas

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DALLAS — Talk about your River Monsters! Dallas attorney Levi McCathern killed one last week in Leon County, Texas. At 880 pounds on certified scales, McCathern's prize alligator would rank among the top five or six biggest Texas gators reported since modern alligator hunting seasons began in 1984.

McCathern was with hunting and fishing outfitter Steve Barclay on private property adjacent to the Trinity River. They were after a specific animal that the guide has been hunting for at least three years.

"We'd see this big alligator in the same general area before the hunting season began," Barclay said, "but we could never find him when we had a client during the season."

That changed during a spot-and-stalk hunt when McCathern made a perfect rifle shot on the animal at about 100 yards. At that distance, executing a shot on a reptilian brain about the size of a golf ball is no mean feat. The shot was a good one, but the gator rolled off the bank and disappeared into deep water.

McCathern could not wait around for the recovery. His 14-year-old son, Noah, who had already bagged a 9-foot gator, had to return home for a youth trip, and McCathern had to attend his wife's birthday party. There's no photo of him with the huge alligator.

The recovery was nothing but hard work, anyway, Barclay said. He and his deckhand, Ryan Burton, first had to locate the sunken reptile, which was beneath the bank where it had rolled into the water. Then they spent two hours using a 4,000-pound winch to put the alligator in the airboat.

"We almost pulled down a big willow tree in the process," said Barclay. "The place where I launch my airboat is just a sandy lane, and I was afraid that my truck wouldn't pull the airboat and the gator both out of the water."

Barclay decided that the best bet was to winch the alligator up the hill and into the back of his truck. With the huge animal's head resting on the truck cab and its tail dangling off the tailgate, he then drove to Crockett and parked on the town square.

"We shut Crockett down for a while," Barclay said. Even in East Texas a dinosaur-sized reptile loaded in the bed of a pickup truck is a rare sight.

Barclay measured the animal two ways. For the private lands alligator permit, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department requires a measurement taken along the gator's belly. It measured 13 feet, 2 inches. While hanging, which Barclay said allows the reptile's muscles to relax and provides a more accurate measurement, it taped 13 feet, 8 inches.

Via email, McCathern wrote that he and his son do a lot of hunting together. Since the fall, they've hunted elk, bison, aoudad, axis deer, white-tailed deer, turkeys and ducks.

"But this was my first alligator hunt," McCathern wrote. "It was the thrill of my hunting career. I'm still smiling."

Commercial hide hunting in the early 1900s almost drove the American alligator extinct by 1950. In 1967, the animals were listed as endangered. By 1984, alligators had rebounded with such vigor that Texas began a hunting season under a strict quota system.

TPWD's alligator program leader Amos Cooper said the department does not conduct statewide alligator surveys but a four-county coastal area in Southeast Texas has an estimated population of 280,000 gators. He said alligators live as long as 45 years in the wild, 60 years in captivity.

Since 1984, four alligators measuring at least 14 feet have been documented in Texas, and Cooper figures each of them weighed 900 pounds or more. None were weighed on certified scales. The longest documented Texas gator since 1984 measured 14 feet, 4 inches.

Though alligators continue to grow their entire lives, they probably don't get much bigger than that. A Louisiana alligator killed in the early 1900s was said to have measured just over 19 feet, but there's no photo or other documentation.