



BY TIM WILLIAMS, © GATORLAND

Gatorland

The Alligator Capital of the World
By Cindy Lowe

BY TIM WILLIAMS, © GATORLAND

Long before the visionary eyes of Walt

Disney turned to Central Florida, one Owen Godwin had a dream of his own.

Gatorland, one of Florida's pioneer tourist attractions, is the fulfillment of that dream.

Located between Orlando and Kissimmee, Gatorland has exhibited alligators and other reptiles, birds and animals for some 47 years and is proud to continue its tradition of showcasing real Florida.

"We've always held to the 'Old Florida' image. We're not going to go high-tech," says Entertainment Manager Tim Williams. "We want people to come and see natural things."

Not only does the attraction give visitors an enjoyable experience, but it also hopes to pass on knowledge and appreciation of these natural things, Williams says.

"We need to learn how to look at our life and environment and see what's really there," he adds.

Founder Godwin saw what was there. His purpose in building this park was to preserve a piece of natural Florida for visitors and residents to enjoy.

The unfolding of his manifest destiny would begin even before his birth:

Godwin's grandfather became a cattle rancher on this land shortly after the end of the Civil War.

He and the other Florida Crackers— cattlemen who cracked a whip to drive their herds— were menaced by this abundance of alligators, which were killing their calves. So, the profitable sport of gator hunting came into play.

In the 1920s, grandson Owen hunted gators in the

marshes. His mother made gator skin belts and purses and sold them to the tourists who had begun to flock to the state for its warm, sunny winters.

The family's small gift shop and roadside pond, which Godwin stocked with baby alligators, planted a seed in his mind that would grow with him into adulthood.

Years later, he longed to build a proper, natural setting to display Florida's reptiles.

Finally, he put legs to his dream and bought 15 acres near the small town of Kissimmee. Starting with a handful of gators, Owen's zoo grew in size and population when he added deer, bears, ostriches, monkeys and a pair of zebras to his menagerie, many of which he had caught on safaris in Alaska, India and Africa.

By the early 1960s, the alligator became a protected species as the public realized its scarcity in the wild due to poaches and hunters. Godwin and others then worked to better raise gators in captivity, helping to keep these modern-day dinosaurs from going the way of their ancient cousins.

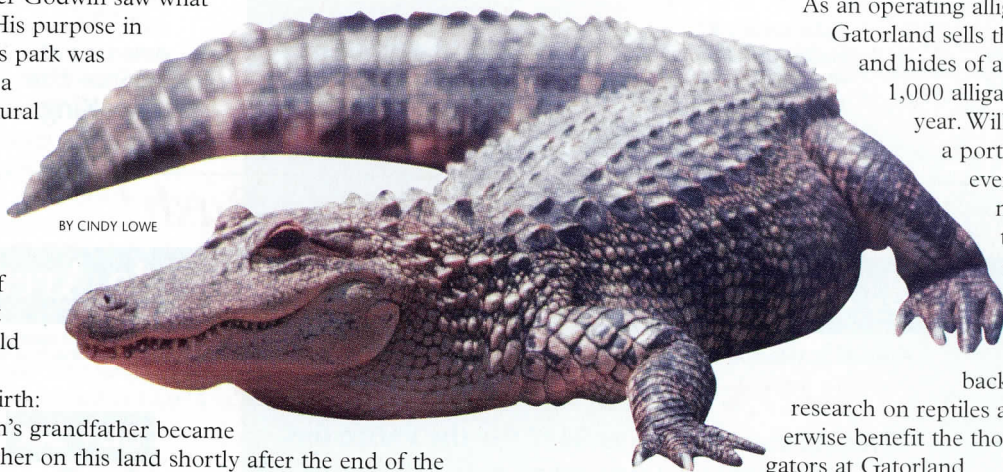
Once hunted to almost the verge of extinction, gators have made a remarkable comeback. "I'm proud to be a small part of that," Williams says, who is also a herpetologist, a zoologist who studies reptiles.

As an operating alligator farm, Gatorland sells the meat and hides of at least 1,000 alligators a year. Williams said a portion of every dollar made from the sale of meat and leather products goes back to

research on reptiles and to otherwise benefit the thousands of gators at Gatorland.

Cooperating with the University of Florida, Gatorland has developed new techniques in alligator husbandry, including producing the world's only artificially inseminated alligator hatchlings.

The park, still owned by the Godwin family, has continued to grow through the years to a 70-plus-acre compound with thousands of reptile residents.



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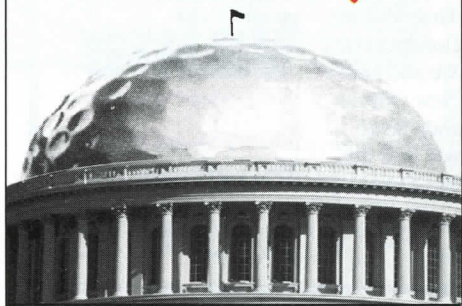
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The most recently acquired 10 acres is a natural alligator breeding marsh and bird rookery, attracting wild, native wading birds. Nearly 1,000 of these birds have flown in to build nests and raise their young over the watchful eyes of alligators.

"The birds know gators offer protection from predators like bobcats and raccoons," Williams says. But, he granted any bird that falls to the water would be a tasty snack for a gator.

This area is quite an exciting place for humans, too. An elevated boardwalk meanders through the marsh, allowing visitors to get close to nesting gators and birds alike. A three-story observation tower gives one an overview of the marshlands.

Another nature-lover's delight is the Swamp Walk. Guests may stroll a 2,000-foot winding walkway through a natural cypress swamp and maybe catch a glimpse of some wild critters living there.



BY CINDY LOWE

Flavio Morrissey wrestles gators for the crowd.

However, reptiles are still the stars of the show at Gatorland. Three different performances are presented to educate and entertain visitors.

Snakes of Florida, the newest show in the park, explains some of the differences among the 69 varieties of Florida's poisonous and non-poisonous snakes. It helps give people a better understanding of why snakes should not be feared, but respected.

The Gator Jumparoo Show has been amazing tourists for a dozen or so years and was the original show at Gatorland. Alligators show off their athletic abilities by pushing themselves out of the water with their strong tails. They then snap their jaws around a grade-A fryer chicken held in the hand of a trainer. "It's a very dangerous show," Williams says. "We've been very fortunate that nobody has been hurt."

Perhaps the best-known activity at Gatorland is gator wrestling—Cracker style. Gator handlers give a lesson in how to overcome an alligator, something the cattlemen of old learned for survival.

Gator wrangling may not seem like a sought-after career, but for a few gator handlers, it's so much fun that it's almost worth doing for no pay.

Handler Nick Clark says he's had a love for reptiles for years. But, what really got him started? "It's amazing what unemployment will make you do!" he jokes. He's been a snake and gator handler at Gatorland for three years now. He says his constant goal is "getting through a day without being injured."

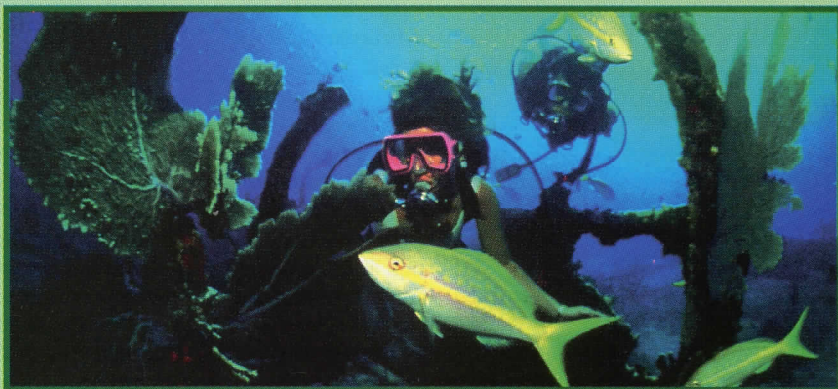
Flavio Morrissiey has worked with reptiles at the park for six years. He says he was very eager to wrestle gators: "We kept buggin' Tim (Williams), 'When can we get on the alligators? When can we get on the alligators?'"

Gatorland is open daily at 9 a.m. until dusk, rain or shine. The entire park, except for the observation tower, is wheelchair accessible. Deep-fried gator nuggets and smoked gator ribs are available, with more traditional fare at Pearl's Smokehouse Restaurant. Items for sale include alligator leather boots.

For more information, call (407) 855-5496 or write Gatorland at 14501 S. Orange Blossom Trail, Orlando, FL 32837-6699. 🐊

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