



Life in the Rocks



The Newsletter of the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission Nongame Aquatics Program

Summary of the First Alligator Hunt in Arkansas

By Kelly Irwin, Herpetologist

As the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission (AGFC) herpetologist, part of my job assignment, beginning in 2001, was the creation, implementation, and coordination of a statewide nuisance alligator coordinator (NAC) network. The NAC network was created so the agency would have better coordination and consistent data collection in responding to nuisance alligator calls. Then, in 2002, I was tasked with the initiation and coordination of a two-year alligator population survey. Both of these tasks would prove to be critical elements in achieving the long-range goal of the AGFC to establish an alligator sport hunt in Arkansas. To accomplish this goal, the AGFC had to provide both historic and recent management

information (i.e., nuisance occurrence and population survey reports), in conjunction with an alligator management plan, to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) for use in the review process for approval of an alligator hunt. Thus, I was tasked with compiling and writing the *Nuisance Alligator Occurrence and Alligator Population Survey* reports and acted as co-author, compiler, and editor in the production of an alligator management plan, in collaboration with the Wildlife Management Division's Alligator Management Team. All of these documents were completed and submitted by August of 2006, and the USFWS granted approval for the alligator hunt in May of 2007.



Mike Cottingham with his 12' 6" bull gator, taken from Cypress Bayou in Hempstead County on September 22, 2007.

Photo courtesy of Mike Harris, Sulphur River WMA, Area Manager

It should be noted that the AGFC Wildlife Management Division (WMD) is in charge of all aspects of alligator management, and all of the actions described above were accomplished through my close collaboration with, and as a result of work performed by many AGFC employees in the WMD.

The stats are in, and the first AGFC-sanctioned and regulated alligator sport hunt was concluded on the last weekend of September 2007. A total of 32 alligator permits were issued for the 2007 hunt, which took place during the last two weekends in September. Hunters were allowed to hunt from one-half hour after sunset on Friday, until one-half hour before sunrise on Monday, during these two weekends. Hunters were required to attend an official AGFC sponsored alligator hunt training and safety workshop, prior to being awarded a permit to legally hunt alligator. Each hunter was assigned to a specific body of water within one of two open alligator hunt zones, one in the southeastern (Zone 3), and one in the southwestern (Zone 1) corner of state. Each hunter was allowed to harvest only one alligator greater than or equal to four feet in total length.

Of the 32 permits issued, 21 hunters (or 65.6%) successfully bagged an alligator; 12 in Zone 1 and 9 in Zone 3 (see table). Total lengths ranged from 4' 9" – 12' 8," and the breakdown by sex ratio 12 males and 9 females. Harvest data and post-harvest population survey data (to be conducted in spring 2008) will be supplied to the USFWS next year for another review, prior to approval of a second alligator hunt in 2008. With the application of a conservative harvest management strategy, it is hoped that a limited alligator sport hunt can be continued in years to come.

The following table is a brief summary of the data that I have received for the 21 alligators harvested in 2007. N/A refers to data that have not yet been made available to me.

County	TL ft/in	Sex
N/A	12' 8"	male
Hempstead	12' 6"	male
Lafayette	10' 9"	male
N/A	10' 3"	male
Hempstead	10' 1"	male
Little River	10' 0"	male
Arkansas	9' 0"	male
Arkansas	8' 6"	female
Hempstead	8' 6"	male
Lafayette	8' 5"	female
Little River	8' 5"	male
Hempstead	8' 0"	female
Drew	7' 11"	female
Sevier	7' 7"	male
Hempstead	7' 6"	female
N/A	7' 5"	male
Hempstead	7' 2"	female
N/A	6' 8"	female
N/A	6' 5"	female
Miller	5' 10"	male
Arkansas	4' 9"	female

Pebbles...

(Quick notes on what we've been up to...)

- Kelly spent about five weeks in the field conducting the biennial hellbender long-term monitoring survey. Thanks to the able, and much appreciated, assistance of AGFC colleagues Bill Posey and Jeff Quinn, retired AGFC employee Richard Shopen, and collaborative efforts of Missouri Department of Conservation herpetologist, Jeff Briggler, and MDC Fisheries Division biologist, John Ackerson, 19 of 21 potential sites were surveyed this year. Irwin assisted Briggler in additional survey work on the Eleven Point River in Missouri as part of the reciprocal survey assistance.
- Brian set up a special one-day display and presented a program on Arkansas' Crayfish at the Janet Huckabee Arkansas River Valley Nature Center in Fort Smith. He will be presenting a similar event at the Mike Huckabee Delta Rivers Nature Center in Pine Bluff on December 8th.
- Kelly was busy in July with several activities revolving around the upcoming, first ever, alligator hunt. He gave several newspaper, radio and television interviews during an alligator media outing in Hempstead County. The media outlets ran several stories on alligator management and the hunt during the first week of August.
- Brian attended the annual conference of the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists in St. Louis, Missouri. This was the first time Brian attended this group's conference, and he found many presentations with relationship to Nongame Aquatics Program interests in Arkansas.
- In a related matter, Kelly hosted the AGFC Alligator Management Team meeting at the Benton field office, where final preparations were made in planning and coordinating the September alligator hunt. He was responsible for writing and compiling the alligator hunt safety and training manual for use in the required attendance meetings for all drawn alligator hunt participants.
- Brian spent some time in the field trawling for darters with researchers from Arkansas Tech University.
- Brian attended several meetings involved with the Arkansas Aquatic Nuisance Species Task Force.
- Kelly assisted Bill Posey, AGFC malacologist, in conducting mussel surveys on the Spring River.
- Brian and Fisheries Assistant Chief, Mark Oliver, attended an Aquatic Nuisance Species Risk Assessment Workshop in Kansas City.

Pebbles...

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- Brian completed GIS exercises to select sampling sites for this year's crayfish surveys.
- Brian, Bill, Kelly, and even our boss, Steve Filipek, participated in a multi-agency teacher training workshop, entitled *September on the Saline*, hosted on the Saline River in Bradley County. This was part of the Education Division's *Project Wet – Project Wild – Project Learning Tree and Stream Team* combined training program hosted by Pat Knighten, AGFC Project Wild Coordinator.
- Brian set up an Arkansas crayfish display at the Fourche Creek Watershed Appreciation Day event.
- Brian, Bill, and Kelly attended a Fisheries Division staff meeting at Lake DeGray.
- Brian began the process of finding and hiring a new part-time technician.



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