



Fishing! Fishing! Fishing! That's what we do in the deep sea fishing club of the villages. But, our members do a lot of other things; like golfing, pickleball, archery, swimming, dancing or even cruise trips out of the country. One member, Brian, does something a little different – he hunts Gators. Yeah... Alligators. Big alligators!

For those of you not familiar with a Gator hunt, let me pass on the information that Brian has given to me. You might think a Gator hunt involves getting a high-powered rifle with a scope, spotting a big alligator someplace, and blasting him out of the water. **You would be wrong.** A real Gator hunt is much more interesting and exciting than that.

First of all, Florida is pretty protective of alligators and you must apply for a permit to get A tag to hunt an alligator. They limit the number of tags given out and you must select an area or a county that you wish to hunt in and each location has a certain number of tags available. You make your application and pay \$272 per tag and hope that you get one. Brian got one, in fact he got two as he was hunting with a buddy and their tags were for Polk County.

This was a first time for Brian so he decided that he should hire a guide. He made arrangements and settled on dates for the hunt and prepared to go. They targeted a lake in Polk County known to have some big gators. Here's how the hunt went down...

Brian meets the guide and a "helper" in the late evening with his boat (a flat bottom about 22'). The guide has explained there are two main ways to hunt; one is by baiting to draw in the gator, the other is simply cruising around looking for them. They decide on the cruising method. They all have bright headlamps on and the boat has a spotlight – after all, they are doing this in the dark. Yep... hunting around for big gators in a small boat in the dark – something everyone would probably do. Not!

Their equipment consists of a couple of fishing rods spooled with heavy braided line and a large treble hook tied on. They have some rope. No rifles and no handguns to be used other than for self protection. They have what's called a "Bang-stick". Just like it sounds, it is a

stick fitted to accept a bullet and charge at one end – that would be the end opposite of the end you are holding. With all this high tech and lethal equipment, off a-hunting they go.

When you are hunting for alligators in the dark, you must have a bright spotlight and headlamps because all you will ever see is a couple of orange gleaming eyes just barely out of the water. The gator is hunting too. You're slowly cruising the shoreline and Bingo! You spot one – a pair of gleaming eyes. Now, they say you can tell the size of a gator by how far apart his eyes are. But, if you're not experienced, that's not much help. The guide will have some idea. Cut the engine, drop the trolling motor in and start sneaking up on the gator. He's no dummy – Whoosh! He goes down. You wait. Then, the eyes show up again.

This hide and seek game may go on for a bit while you are trying to get close enough to reach him with your fishing rod. Wait... we're going to fish for a gator? Not exactly. The guide is going to cast the rod and try to snag the gator with the big treble hook. I say "snag" because there is no way you are going to penetrate that hide with a hook. You get lucky and have him snagged but you don't know what size he is and how much of a tussle he is going to put up. You are about to find out! The gator wants to go one way and you want to bring him toward the boat. If it's a fairly big one, you are going to need to snag him with the other rod – hopefully at the opposite end of where he is snagged now for better leverage.

The sole objective of this exercise is to get the gator close enough to the boat so you can tell how big he is. Once you get a good look at him you will determine if he is a "keeper" or not. If not, you just give the rod some slack and the hook will drop off and he swims away. Brian is looking for something at least about 8'. When he finds him (which he will) – trust me they will have a struggle on their hands trying to get that gator up next to the boat. At times they may be closing the distance by pulling the boat toward the gator rather than the other way around. A pissed off gator of any size is a handful.

Brian finds his Gator – about 8' and they get two hooks into him and after a considerable struggle, they get him next to the boat. Now what? This is where the "Bang stick" comes in. With the stick loaded you now have to poke him on the top of the head with it and BANG! The charge goes off and the gator is subdued – mostly. When he is dead and you do want to make sure he is dead before tying ropes around him and dragging him in the boat. That my fishing club member is GATOR HUNTING.

What do you do with him – why you eat him of course. Gators used to be worth \$25-30 per foot back when you had alligator shoes, handbags, boots, etc. Now they are worth about \$5 per foot. The tail is good eating and the rest of the edible body parts are ground up into sausage. Gator meat is not something you might crave but it is good to get off your bucket list of edible animals.

Brian kept the skull as a trophy and a reminder of the exciting gator hunt he had.