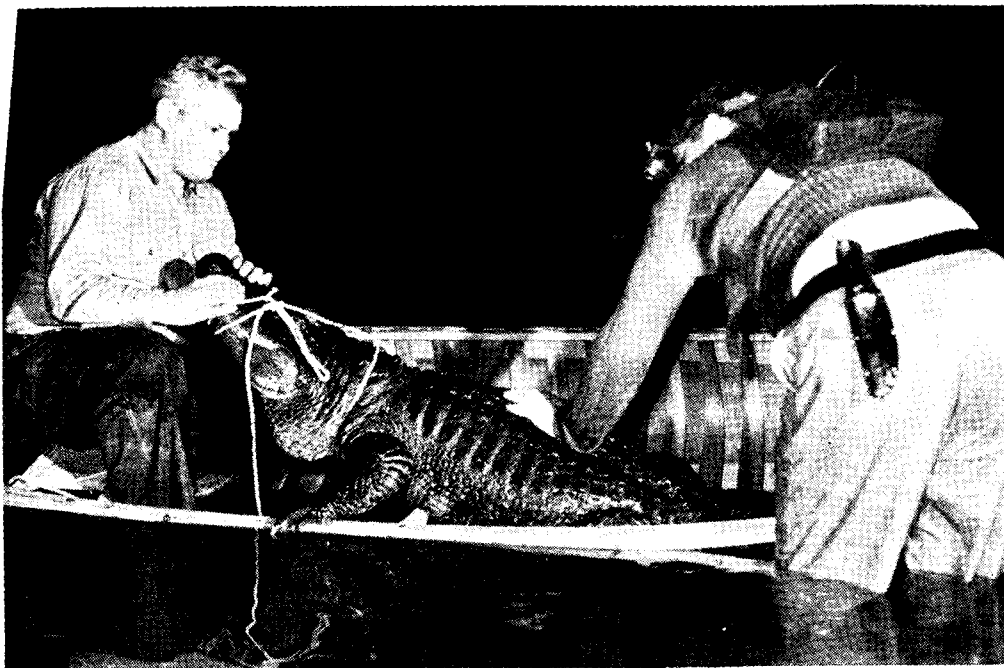




Coming up from behind, Ross Allen of Silver Springs, Florida, gets astride an 8-foot bull 'gator. Once a 'gator clamped his jaws on Allen's headlamp, just missing his nose



While the beast is thrashing around wildly, trying to throw off his captor by side-swiping his knees or sinking under logs, Allen manages to slip a noose over his jaws



Despite the false air of bravado, the unhappy author distrusts the rope's strength. Getting the unwieldy monster into the fragile canoe for the trip back takes skill



The alligator has two "business" ends; his tail can be almost as lethal as his jaws. Here Allen and the author tie legs behind his back before loading him in the car

# BULL OF THE SWAMPS

BY JOHN MALONEY

Hunting alligators in the Florida swamps by night is strictly for those who thrive on a life of excitement and danger

IT ALL started down at Ross Allen's Florida Reptile Institute at Silver Springs, where he has collected thousands of rattlers, copperheads, moccasins, turtles, alligators and crocodiles, which he uses to give visitors to his stockade a thirty-five-cent

We were looking over into a pen of six- or eight-foot 'gators when he casually remarked that he had gone out into the swamps and captured ten-foot alligators with nothing but his bare hands, a short piece of rope, and

a 75-pound canoe. "It can't be done," I said. "I'll show you tonight," he replied, and that was how I found myself a few hours later up to my armpits in muck and black swamp water, wishing I had kept my mouth shut.

The moon was coming up over that cypress, bay and mangrove jungle when we slipped the canoe into Spring Creek, a 60-to-100-foot-wide stream of crystal-clear water that bursts out of a tremendous boil known as Alexander Spring. On our heads we wore strong battery lamps to spot the eyes of alligators where they lay under tangles of vines alongshore or at the edges of lily clumps. But as we floated downstream with the current, it seemed that the eyes of all the swamp-land creatures were reflected by the light.

There was another world watching us from under the canoe's keel. A two-foot eel slith-

ered into the underwater grasses when our beam caught him swimming ten feet below. A long-necked, soft-shell turtle tried to hide his eighteen-inch shell under a mass of lily roots. Farther downstream we floated over schools of fresh-water mullet, spawning bass, three-foot gars and hundreds of bream and speckled perch.

If you've never been in the heart of a swamp at night, you've yet to hear one of the most amazing combinations of sound to be found anywhere: the deep, rolling resonance of the big green frogs, the soprano of tree frogs piping in chorus, and all the weird and surprising calls of the night birds—the bullbats, the great owl of deep woods, the quarreling, jerky cries of bittern, cranes and limpkin and the infinitely sad calls of the chuck-will's-widow. Countless insects added

their remarks. Even the big bass sometimes seemed to slap their tails in unison on the water when they leaped to snap at bugs attracted by our lights.

While these alligators—hang-overs from a previous age—which we were hunting are not exactly facing extinction in the Gulf states, hunters and natural enemies have reduced numbers to where the sight of one in a roadside canal or in Florida's thousands of lakes has become a rarity rather than a commonplace. Their nesting habits add to the natural hazards.

The female 'gator makes a nest on shore by scratching leaves, brush and mud together and piling it about thirty inches high and four feet in diameter. There she deposits her twenty to sixty goose-sized eggs and

(Continued on page 36)

PHOTOGRAPHS FOR COLLIER'S BY HARRY PENNINGTON, JR.



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