

Alligator Adventure Reptile Park

Check out the herps at this fun South Carolina reptile park on your next vacation.

Text and photos by Steve Cooper

When most of us think of alligator attractions and reptile parks, Florida usually comes to mind. With such well-established institutions as St. Augustine's Alligator Farm, Silver Springs Attraction and Gatorland, the peninsula is arguably the capitol of reptile-oriented zoological parks. Now, however, South Carolina can boast a world class alligator and reptile attraction of its own, Alligator Adventure.

I recently had the opportunity to visit Alligator Adventure and found it to be a fine addition to the small and elite fraternity of private reptile parks. Located at North Myrtle Beach, an area perhaps best known to the white-shoe-shod, plaid-clad set for its 100 golf courses, Alligator Adventure is situated on a 15-acre site just four blocks from the Atlantic Ocean. Owned and operated by Sam Puglia and his son Jake, it is a component of Barefoot Landing, a sprawling resort destination offering tourists rentals, restaurants, entertainment and recreational activities.

A Wagler's Viper (*Tropidolaemus wagleri*) is just one of the venomous snakes on display at Alligator Adventure.

Father and son share an interest in wildlife and nature. When a group of albino alligators were discovered in a Louisiana bayou in 1989 and were offered for sale, they decided to purchase the group and build their alligator attraction around the unique acquisitions. Crocodilian expert Dr. C. L. Abercrombie was called upon to head an onsite research facility. Educational programs were designed by alligator biologist Ken Alfieri. Dr. Sam Seashole was enlisted to administer a fully equipped veterinary hospital and Adamm Smith came onboard as zoological director. Alligator Adventure opened to the public in 1995, offering for exhibit one of the world's finest crocodilian collections, a reptile inventory surpassing many public zoos in diversity, plus an eclectic assortment of mammalian and avian species.

Albino Alligators

Since its inception, albino alligators have been one of Alligator Adventures' claims to fame. First discovered in 1989 (and again in 1991), the alligators are true albinos-unlike the leucistic white alligators owned by the Audubon Zoo. While both types are white, the albinos have red eyes rather than blue, and are the phenotypic result of a double recessive genotype. Currently, Alligator Adventure exhibits two albinos, an otherworldly appearing 10-foot male and a particularly beautiful opalescent juvenile female. Other members of the original group are on loan to the Cincinnati Zoo and Silver Springs Attraction.

Alligator Adventures' big 10-footer is exhibited alongside a smaller, normal-colored female, in a building designed to accommodate the special requirements of this unique and valuable resident. Albino alligators, lacking melanin (the dark pigment that protects animals from solar radiation), are subject to severe sunburn, hence the need for indoor housing. Further, alligators are not exactly gentle in their conspecific interactions and compete violently with each other over food, territory and mates. The albinos are far too rare and valuable to risk serious injury by housing them within a population of large and basically wild alligators.

The ivory white male is extremely tame and the design of his exhibit allows for surprisingly close viewing and photographic opportunities. Adamm hopes to breed this big guy in the year 2000, by which time the albino female will have attained an adequate size.

False gavials are members of the monotypic genus *Tomistoma*. You can recognize them easily by their extremely narrow snouts.

Alligators

True to its billing, Alligator Adventure exhibits plenty of alligators-some 700, ranging from hatchlings to adult bulls weighing in at 800 pounds. The two main alligator areas are a moat that winds its way through the interior of the park and a large marsh near its perimeter. During the appropriate seasons, all nuances of alligator behavior; feeding, courting, mating, nest building and egg laying can be witnessed firsthand from vantage points at both locales. During the warmer months, night feedings take place at the moat from a platform opposite viewing areas. The nighttime sight of massive adult alligators lunging halfway out of the water, along with the accompanying sounds of snapping jaws and bones being pulverized, is the stuff of nightmares. You have to experience it to fully appreciate the subliminal effect. It made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

The marsh feedings are conducted from an elevated boardwalk. They offer great photo opportunities as scores of large

alligators compete for chicken and nutria carcasses, a primordial display with mud, foaming water and bits of offal sprayed in all directions. Truly surreal is witnessing the carnage from the deck of the House of Blues while sipping a cold one and listening to Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Born on the Bayou." That's right; there's a House of Blues on a hill just outside the grounds, a nice diversion during the midday heat of a South Carolina summer.

Crocodiles

Alligator Adventure has a world-class crocodilian collection featuring some 14 of the 22 recognized species. Perhaps most notable are a group of Tobago caimans (*Caiman* sp.), a yet-to-be-described species which attains sexual maturity at only 3 feet of length. These are the only specimens on exhibit anywhere in the world outside Tobago itself.

The entire collection of crocs and caimans are on exhibit year round in outdoor enclosures. The pools within the enclosures are heated to 80 degrees Fahrenheit from November through March, making this possible. Adamm employs an innovative biological maintenance technique in crocodilian management. The African fish Tilapia mossambica control algae growth within the pools while mosquito fish, *Gambusia affinis*, control mosquitoes. Many of the crocodilians also share their habitats with various species of aquatic turtles. The crocs are well fed and the turtles are not a favored prey species of crocs (unlike alligators), permitting the cohabitation. The turtles pay their rent by consuming leftover bits of food. Alligator Adventure's collection includes this impressive albino snapping turtle.

Being in full view of thousands of visitors does not seem to inhibit the crocodilians from behaving naturally. To date, three species: Morelet's crocs (*Crocodylus moreletii*), Siamese crocs (*Crocodylus siamensis*) and Yacare caiman (*Caiman crocodilus yacare*) have reproduced successfully in the outdoor enclosures.

As in the wild, competition for mates, courtship and mating can take place at any time of the day, but nest building and egg laying usually occur late at night. Adamm and his staff remove the eggs from the nests for artificial incubation, but the female croc's instincts have them guarding their now empty nest for weeks. During this period, the females are particularly aggressive, sometimes threatening nearby visitors with open mouths and explosive charges. Even from the safety of the boardwalk, protected by walls and chain link, the maternal fury of hormonally enhanced mother crocs can be quite unnerving. That's the great thing about these outdoor enclosures: You not only observe the animals themselves, but also witness natural behavior close up and in complete safety. This year should be a record setter for Alligator Adventure's croc breeding program. Not only are the aforementioned species expected to repeat their successes, but two other species, Muggers (*Crocodylus palustris*) and False gavials (*Tomistoma schlegelii*), are projected to reproduce in 1999, as well. A Chinese alligator (*Alligator sinensis*) breeding program is also planned for the near future.

Tommy and Sweet Pea

While Adamm has hopes of breeding all his charges, and has had remarkable success in the short time Alligator Adventure has been in existence (25 reptile species have been bred here to date), false gavials are at the top of his breeding wish list. Tommy is a giant 30-year-old male measuring 15 feet in length and weighing 1,700 pounds. His female friend, Sweet Pea, is a svelte 300-pounder in her 20s. The two mated for the first time in 1997 and again in 1998 and 1999. When Tommy was introduced to Sweet Pea's pond, the pair began mating immediately, in full view of awed spectators. This coupling lasted 21 1/2 hours but, unfortunately, did not result in a new generation of bouncing baby Tomistoma. Hope runs high that this will be the year Tommy and Sweet Pea become the first captive Tomistoma to reproduce in captivity. This would be a momentous occurrence for such a magnificent species that is so critically endangered.

False gavials are members of the monotypic genus *Tomistoma*. You can recognize them easily by their extremely narrow snouts, evolved to enhance their ability to capture their primary prey, fish. Although they superficially resemble Gavials (*Gavialis gangeticus*, subfamily Gavialidae), Tomistoma are true crocodiles and members of the subfamily Crocodylidae. False gavials inhabit swampy wetlands of tropical Southeast Asia and attain lengths in excess of 5 meters. Habitat loss and poaching have taken their toll on wild populations, and the species is critically endangered. Both CITES (Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species) and the United States Department of Interior list them as appendix I animals. The Crocodile Advisory Group has a keen interest in the captive propagation of *Tomistoma* and works closely with Adamm and Alligator Adventure to help coordinate the program with other zoos and establish protocols. This is a prime example of how privately owned and funded zoological institutions can pool their resources with other organizations in an attempt to rescue a species on the brink of extinction.

Komodo Dragons

Monitors have long occupied a special place in my heart, especially Komodo dragons (*Varanus komodoensis*). Alligator Adventure has two beauties on permanent exhibit residing in a custom enclosure built exclusively for them.

The glass enclosed outdoor pen provides for up-close viewing and photography. Landscaped with logs and boulders, it

even has its own stream. Feeding time is worth seeing. A dragon wolfing down whole nutria is a sight to behold. The Komodo dragon's mass, unexpectedly vivid coloration and demeanor will impress anyone who hasn't seen one, especially this close. They swagger about the enclosure exhibiting all the confidence and arrogance inherent in a dominant predator. Komodo dragons rule unchallenged over an island domain where they alone occupy the niche at the top of the food chain. Humans are little more than potential prey, and the only thing for the dragons to fear are larger Komodo dragons.

Serpentarium

The large, well-designed serpentarium at Alligator Adventure houses three large species of monitors along with an extensive collection of snakes (38 species in all) in 41 displays of varying descriptions. *Varanus albigularis ionedesi*, *V. salvator* and *V. salvadori* each have large accommodations with access to spacious outdoor pens. The 38 snake species include representatives of four families: Boidae, Colubridae, Viperidae and Elapidae.

Many uncommon species can be found here, including, but not limited to, Madagascar twig nosed snakes (*Langaha madagascariensis*), Peruvian rainbow boas (*Epicrates cenchria ssp.*) and Aruba Island rattlesnakes (*Crotalus unicolor*).

A nearby sister building houses 23 lizard, four turtle and seven amphibian species in terraria of varying sizes and designs. Adamm keeps his 170-pound alligator snapping turtle (*Macroclemys temminckii*) here in an eye-level aquarium. There are plans to acquire another specimen weighing in at an unbelievable 211 pounds. It would probably be the largest freshwater turtle exhibited anywhere. A large and surprisingly beautiful common snapping turtle (*Chelydra serpentina*) is exhibited in a like manner. The terraria housing the lizards and amphibians are designed and decorated according to the needs and natural history of the resident species. For example, dendrobatid species (poison-dart frogs) occupy terraria landscaped with live bromeliads that provide natural pools for the deposition of the frogs' tadpoles. Clearly, a lot of thought, work and technology has gone into the construction and design of these buildings and their respective displays to not only accommodate the needs of the reptiles and amphibians, but to present them in an aesthetically appealing way.

Tortoises, Birds and Mammals

Nine species of tortoises and 28 species of turtles round out a well represented order Testudines. They are housed throughout the grounds of Alligator Adventure along with dozens of birds, including Amazon parrots, cockatoos, macaws, hornbills and 20 duck species. Mammalians, like reticulated giraffes and capybaras, fill out a wildlife inventory that many a zoo would envy.

As if all the wildlife displays and feedings weren't enough, Alligator Adventure also offers two separate reptile shows every hour on the hour from 10 a.m. until closing. One show features alligators and crocs with the other snakes. Both are entertaining and informative, dispelling prejudices and unreasonable fears, while promoting the need for tolerance and conservation of reptiles. The effect these shows must have on the opinions of the tens of thousands of annual attendees can only be positive.

Crocodylian history spans some 200 million years, from the Mesozoic era to present day. They are far from living fossils or curious antiques of a bygone age. The fact that crocs still exist, bears witness to the evolutionary perfection of their physical attributes and adaptability. Somehow, they managed to survive the calamity that brought about the extinction of their famous contemporaries, the dinosaurs. Crocs have flourished for eons inhabiting the world's tropical and subtropical wetlands. Only recently has their survival been threatened by humankind's exploding population.

Captive breeding is an integral part of preserving our planet's crocodylian heritage. Institutions like Alligator Adventure act as repositories for the gene pools necessary for the success of any reestablishment plan. Alligator Adventure's exhibits and educational programs help foster public support for crocodylian and reptile conservation, and the wealth of information gained through the park's experiences adds to the shared data of those with the common goal of preservation.

Alligator Adventure is funded exclusively by paid admission. It receives no public funding and is completely dependent on visitor patronage. Offering exhibits that are fascinating to anyone interested in wildlife, especially those of us involved in herpetology, it is a highly recommended vacation destination. The owners, management and staff should be proud of what they've created. With all of their commitment, talent, creativity and enthusiasm, this place can only get better. Bravo!