

Looking for those

# glowing eyes

*By Tony Young*



Have you ever wondered **how it would feel**  
to **ride around on an airboat** at night and  
**count alligator eyes?**

If the answer's yes or the idea sounds like it might be fun, becoming an alligator biologist with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) might be your calling.

Now, let me clear something up – I'm not a biologist – I wasn't blessed with those kind of smarts. But I do work for the agency's Division of Hunting and Game Management, and when alligator biologist Steve Stiegler asked me if I'd like to help him do alligator surveys on some of the Tallahassee area lakes, I jumped at the chance. After all, I've always had a fascination with those giant prehistoric lizards and had never before been on an airboat.

The FWC routinely performs "night-light" surveys, which it has done since 1974, monitoring the state's alligators so it can observe trends in the reptiles' population. Alligators were listed as endangered in 1977, but are currently listed as a species of special concern.

FWC biologists conduct surveys on 131 areas in the spring and summer when the weather's most likely to cooperate and because the reptiles are most visible, as gators are inactive during much of the winter. The information gathered also is important for biologists to decide how many alligator harvest permits to allot on specific waterbodies or "harvest units."

It was the first Tuesday in May last year when I accompanied Steve on my very first alligator night-light survey. Steve had been watching the local

weather all day, and the forecast for the evening showed little chance of rain with only a slight breeze. It was to be a clear, dark night with no moon – perfect conditions for doing a survey from an airboat on 5,757-acre Lake Iamonia.

We arrived at the lake's southern boat landing just after 7 p.m., and after making sure we had everything we needed, we launched the 13-foot airboat. For those who've never seen Lake Iamonia, it's your typical natural, shallow-water Florida lake with an overabundance of aquatic vegetation. Probably 90 percent of the lake's surface is covered by various lily pads, bulrushes, coontail moss and the very invasive, nonnative hydrilla. It's a good habitat for bass, bream, crappie, wading birds, many waterfowl species and, of course, alligators.

Due to the lake's shallow depth with occasional logs and intermittent duck blinds scattered throughout, Steve likes to make a "trial run" before the sun goes down so he can make note of any new obstacles that might be present since last year's survey. Using a global positioning system, Steve can "map out" a safe run during daylight hours and later follow the path at night, knowing it's clear of any objects that could send an airboat airborne.

As we made our way around Lake Iamonia – the cool wind in my face – I sat on the boat's front seat and surveyed the lake, taking note of its beauty and trying



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to remember the last time I'd been there. It was a gorgeous North Florida spring evening, and the sun looked like a big orange ball as it began its descent below the tree line. When we drove over one of the lake's few deeper areas, we passed by a big bull gator swimming out in the open all by itself.

"Most of the time when you see a gator out in the open, in the deeper channel – he's a big one," Steve said.

I remember sitting on the front of that boat – taking it all in and thinking to myself – I love my job.

After making our trial run, Steve brought the airboat to a stop near the boat landing where we'd put in. The sun had already set, but we needed to wait another 30 minutes, until it got dark enough to use the 200,000-candlepower Q-Beam to spot the big, bright-red-glowing eyes of alligators.

While we waited, Steve handed me a thermometer and asked if I could get him a water temperature reading. As the lulling sound of pig frogs seemed to grow increasingly louder with the coming of night, he explained temperature readings were part of the survey and said we'd be taking two more samples and recording the lake's water level before we were done for the night.

After I told him the water was a cool 22 degrees Celsius (about 72 degrees Fahrenheit), he broke out a tablet computer and showed me how to input the data we'd be collecting.

"Not only do we count all the gators we 'shine,' Steve said. We also want to put 'em into size categories."

All in all, we counted 187 gators that evening, and believe it or not, Steve said that number only captured roughly 15 percent of the lake's gator population. After we were done inputting the data into the computer's database program, my eyes probably grew as big as saucers when Steve asked me if I'd like to catch a gator before we left.

He said he needed one in the 4- to 5-foot range for Chinsegut Nature Center's upcoming Reptile/Amphibian Expo, where he'd be making a presentation. I remember nodding my head up and down as a big Cheshire grin spread across my face.

"You want to use a noose or try to 'hand-grab' it?" Steve asked.

I think it surprised him when I said I wanted to lay facedown on the front of the boat and have him ease the vessel over to the one he wanted, and I would snatch the gator up with my bare hands.

And that's exactly what I did – talk about having fun on the job. Oh, but folks – don't try this at home. Remember I already told you, the man upstairs didn't give me those kind of smarts. **FW**

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*Tony Young is an avid outdoorsman and media relations coordinator for FWC's Division of Hunting and Game Management.*



TONY YOUNG

**Above:** Steve Stiegler conducts a trial run on Lake Iamonia before conducting a night-light alligator survey. **Below:** Tony Young holds the young alligator he pulled from the lake. **Facing page:** An alligator's eyes glow as a spotlight illuminates its hiding place.

## Alligator harvest permits

The alligator hunting season runs from Aug. 15 through Nov. 1. More than 4,000 alligator harvest permits will be available on a first-come, first-served basis.

Phase I – Permit sales will run from 10 a.m. (EDT) on June 12 to 11:59 p.m. (EDT) on June 18. Each person will be limited to one permit during this phase.

Phase II – Permit sales will be reopened at 10 a.m. (EDT) on June 19 to purchase any remaining permits.

Applicants have their preference of applying at any county tax collector's office, license agent (retail outlet that sells hunting and fishing licenses), at [MyFWC.com/license](http://MyFWC.com/license) or by calling toll-free 1-888-HUNT FLORIDA (486-8356).

The cost for a resident alligator trapping license and hide validation tags is \$271.50, and nonresidents pay \$1,021.50. The cost for additional permits is \$61.50 regardless of residency.



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