

Hunting Florida's Dinosaurs

Steve Smith
Hampton & Hampton Guide Service

I ease the boat off of plane and idle around the corner into a large cove just off the St. Johns river, the beam of my headlight pans from left to right as hundreds of red eyes glare back at the noisy intruder that just entered their domain. My client Troy, turns and smiles excited to see so many alligators in such a small area. Most glares belong to smaller gators, but as I ease the boat deeper into the cove I spot the gator I had seen a few nights earlier while scouting the area.

The big gator turns slowly away from the boat and to my amazement heads toward the shallowest section of the cove. I tell Troy to "get ready" and he stands on the front deck, then checks the harpoon and line. I keep the big gator right off my bow and accelerate slightly, just enough to overtake him as the water gets too shallow for him to submerge. As the boat nears the gator he turns right, realizing his mistake as he high-tails it for deeper water.

I accelerate quickly and just as I am about to run right over him, I spin the boat to the right and yell "throw, throw". The big gator is an easy target just eight feet off the left side of the boat as Troy's harpoon buries in the center of its back.



Rope peels off the bow and the yellow buoy clears the boat in seconds. The big gator finds deeper water and picks up steam trailing the yellow float fifty feet behind him. After following for a few minutes I accelerate and Troy grabs the buoy, hands me the line, then readies another harpoon. A gator this size needs two lines stuck in him. As the gator re-surfaces and I bring him up on the left side of the boat, before I can give Troy the command to throw, the harpoon is already in the air and hits its mark, now the work begins.

The bull gator runs again this time about a hundred yards, we ease up on him several times maneuvering the boat and gator with the lines, playing him like a big fish on light tackle. Thirty minutes into the game our prey seems to have had enough. I shut the motor off and using one of the lines pull the boat right over top of where he submerged.



Easing the line up inch by inch I hear the gator hit the bottom of the boat and he comes alive, spinning, twisting, and raking his teeth along the side of the aluminum boat. I hand Troy the line and ready the bang stick, a .357 caliber barrel mounted on an extendable pole. As the gator calms and turns his head I ease the bang stick over the side of the boat and hit him right in the "sweet spot". With a thunderous boom this hunt was over.

In 1992 Don Hampton, an avid air-boater and outdoorsman saw an opportunity to share these passions with other people, and Hampton and Hampton Gator Hunts was born. Don approached me with the idea of guiding for him and I jumped on board eager to spend more time on my boat, and to help the state of Florida put a big dent in the alligator population. The alligator population in Florida has exploded over the past twenty years with the latest survey showing well over one million gators statewide.



We hunt public waters during the month of September, when the state awards permits through a lottery drawing, and the rest of the year we hunt on private wetlands with tags issued to us directly by the state. Hampton and Hampton Gator Hunts has hunted all over the state, and provided thousands of people the opportunity to see Florida wetlands at their finest, and take home some tasty gator meat as well.

The first year we hunted out of our personal airboats and quickly realized that although they were well suited for pleasure boating on the marsh, they did not fare well with the rigors of hauling clients, hunting gear, and alligators. We decided first and foremost that a longer boat would afford a safer and more stable platform, and provide more room for clients, gear, and gators. Don chose Hamant Custom Airboats located in Melbourne, FL to build the first “gator boat”. Don and Doug Hamant spent countless hours designing and configuring the hull, power, and seating options. We were very pleased with the end result, a 14 7 hull with plenty of seating, storage, and a solid grass rake.



X

The seat package is designed to comfortably seat four people on the boat. A rear bench seat holds two passengers. The drivers seat is situated in the middle, with a single “fat man” seat mounted forward. The forward seat allows the hunter to sit comfortably with two feet planted on the front deck ready to stand at the guides command, and launch his harpoon.

Storage areas include a large area under the front deck, a large basket under the drivers seat, and a huge aluminum dry storage box attached to the hull stringers just forward of the boats center. The dry storage box is an absolute necessity filled with extra equipment, first aid kit, and clients expensive cameras and personal gear.

Most of the private property we hunt are farms and ranches with no boat ramps. This required us to launch the boats on steep, overgrown levees. Hamant designed a solid

aluminum grass rake, lightweight, but strong enough for a hunter to stand on. As the boat enters the water from the steep levees the rake pushes water in front of the boat, forcing the bow up. The grass rake also adds an additional two feet to the length of the boat for a total length of sixteen feet.

Power is provided by a Continental 220 ground power unit. This workhorse of a motor has provided year after year of trouble-free service. The only modification made to the stock motor was the addition of a second mag (and six more plugs), providing an additional one hundred- fifty rpm. A variable pitch Sensenich carbon fiber (two blade) prop turns at 3000 rpm, and pushes the boat just about anywhere we need to take it. This boat configuration has served our needs well for the past several years, however just like anything else, there is always room for improvement. Business demanded that we order a second boat, so we racked our brains and designed another boat around the same concept as the first, but with some improvements. Again Don chose Hamant Custom Airboats to build this new and improved “gator boat”.

The new boat still under construction should be completed within a few weeks (no hurry we’re not hunting again until spring). The new Hamant hull is fourteen feet long by seven and a half feet wide (the extra six inches in width lends more stability), another solid grass rake will complement the hull bring the total length again to sixteen feet. Other changes being made are small, but important improvements to usability and function. The seat package will remain basically the same design, seating four people comfortably with the hunter seated in front of the driver.

The biggest difference with the new boat will be the powerplant and propeller. The new boat is being outfitted with a supercharged GSO480 aircraft engine. This motor is a real screamer pushing about 350 horsepower. After some test and evaluation of several of the new carbon fiber props on the market, Don and Doug decided to stick with Sensenich, however upgraded to their three blade, variable pitch, carbon fiber prop.

Another big change was the trailer ordered for the new boat. The trailer for the first boat was well built, however it was very heavy. It had plenty of support for towing on regular roadways, but on the un-improved roads, and grown over levees we have to negotiate on the private properties we felt we could do better. Doug Hamant suggested we look at the “Ram-lin” line of trailers. After researching and testing the Ram-lin trailer we determined this was definitely what we were looking for. The Ram-lin trailer is extremely well built, lighter in weight, and with the capability to tilt the trailer for loading and un-loading, has a much higher ground clearance for rough terrain.

We're looking forward to next season, and getting the chance to hunt out of the new boat. The alligator population continues to rise, and we are already booking trips for next year. I think its going to be another great season. If we can be of any assistance or can answer any questions please give us a call, or check out our website at www.hhgatorhunts.com.

Hampton & Hampton Gator Hunts
3635 Aurora Rd.
Melbourne, FL 32934
(321)242-1012
www.hhgatorhunts.com