

## My Unforgettable Wildlife Encounter

Written by M.A. Jan Luber

Saturday, 01 May 2010 13:06 - Last Updated Saturday, 01 May 2010 13:11

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Reprinted from the *Wakulla CoastLine*

It was a beautiful early fall day on the Wakulla River. But then again, it's always glorious when the afternoon sun stretches its golden light through the cypress canopy shimmering into the mysterious waters. My dive buddy and I were just coming up from a 30-minute routine dive, practicing buoyancy and free ascent skills. I had found a large bone of unknown origin at the bottom and was holding it in my hand while surfacing. We filled up our buoyancy control device (BCD) jackets and floated with the mild current towards our boat, when all of a sudden my buddy—who was about 30 feet away whispered urgently, "Don't move, don't talk, be quiet!"

The tone which he commanded my attention struck me as a direct order, so I complied and sat motionless in the water. By that time, I had already lifted the mask onto the top of my head; the regulator was removed from my mouth. I kept my legs close to me in a crouched position, fins in the water, and gazed the shoreline. What I did not realize at the time was that a 12' alligator had slipped silently off the embankment and with one swift swipe of the tail, had stopped directly in front of my left fin. As stealth as a nuclear sub, his periscope eyes were the only parts visible. Since I was facing him he must have thought I was a threat to him and decided that I was not going to be an easy target after all. He drove down underneath me and disappeared. I continued floating to the boat and boarded unscathed. Needless to say, I later researched the do's and don't while diving with alligators! I thank my partner for having the foresight and prior experience of remaining completely still which most likely saved my life. First and foremost, never dive late in the afternoon during fall and winter months when daylight is shortened, since alligators tend to feed at dusk and in the evenings. Alligators normally eat only once every four days and they bask in the sun during the daylight hours to digest their food and warm themselves. They hear sounds of splashing in the water which signal that there may be small prey (bird, deer, raccoon, boar, dog) to investigate for a possible meal. Be vigilant about observing your surroundings whether swimming, walking the shoreline or kayaking close to the water's edge. Alligators usually shy away from humans on land unless provoked. Of course, the water is their territory and we simply must respect that! No matter what the outcome that eye-opening day, to cherish and respect all creatures is a mantra that will ring deep and true with me forever

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