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Alligator Hunting in the Sportsman's Paradise

# GATOR HUNT

**ALONG THE ANTILL CANAL** in Terrebonne Parish, 10 miles southeast of Gibson, we drift for 15 minutes before the first sighting. "*There*," says Rod Bonvillain Jr., a construction foreman from Houma. He moves toward the bow, finger pointing to a disturbance 20 yards ahead in the center of the canal.

At the captain's wheel, Aaron "Boo" Cantrelle, Bonvillain's uncle, has already seen it. He tracks the slight movement — what looks like driftwood, with raised bark resembling brow and nostrils — on the otherwise smooth waterway.

"That's the one," Cantrelle says. "I've been waiting for this one since last year." The boat accelerates. No one speaks.

Here in the Bayou Black area of Terrebonne Parish, with the boat's motor muffling the raucous singsong of limpkins as they feast on apple snails, Cantrelle and Bonvillain continue their pursuit of that primordial predator, the American alligator. Three weeks into this year's season, equipped with one unbaited 16-aught hook and a single .22 caliber rifle, they're on a chase that began, for each of them, generations before. It started here, in this very waterway. Antill Canal is in their blood. Dug in the 1950s for an oil industry that peaked in the '80s only to falter a decade later, the canal is named after Cantrelle's grandfather, Earl Antill Sr., who would take his grandson, whom he called "Boo Boo," on hunting and fishing trips. Ducks, fish, deer, alligators — if they could find it, they would catch or shoot it.

"We've always eaten well around here," Cantrelle says. "That's never been a problem."

Cantrelle remained such a constant presence at Antill's side that his grandfather named his shed — a man cave for hunting — the Boo Boo Inn. Now during Louisiana's annual alligator season, which begins on the last Wednesday of August (east zone) and the first Wednesday of September (west zone), and remains open for 60 days, hunters from the region arrive to sell their catch to a refrigerator truck that parks in front of the floating camp that Cantrelle built 10 years ago.

If Cantrelle returns with a boat full of alligators, he'll be paid for his efforts, but for him this isn't about money. It's about family. It's about tradition.

"I do this because I love it," he says.

Bonvillain, had a similar upbringing in Terrebonne and is on the water today for many of the same reasons.

"It's all family roots back here," he says. "I grew up in the boat from before I could talk." Their enthusiasm at the morning's first sighting offers a portal into their former selves, giddy boys not much taller than the .22 caliber rifle that rests beside them — the rifle that they will use to save this writer should an alligator resurrect itself after they haul it, seemingly lifeless, into the boat.

I blame Bonvillain for this fixation. Five minutes on the water, he told a story — the kind that you wouldn't believe unless you knew to believe in some of the implausibilities that Louisiana offers like sweets. Last year, Cantrelle and Bonvillain caught and shot a 12-foot alligator. That's about as large a creature as most see in the wild today, when female alligators rarely exceed nine feet and male alligators, 13. They shot it in the head. Then they shot it again, both times in the soft, quarter-size "kill spot" on the alligator's skull. "Always double-tap for insurance," Bonvillain says.

Thirty minutes later, the 12-footer rolled over, stood on all fours, and started walking around the boat. Cantrelle and Bonvillain had nowhere to go. They had the rifle, sure, but Cantrelle worried that the bullet would ricochet off the alligator's skull or pierce the

**(LEFT)** Aaron "Boo" Cantrelle and Rod Bonvillain Jr. grew up hunting and fishing on the Antill Canal in Terrebonne Parish. "It's all family roots back here," says Bonvillain. **(TOP)** The American alligator has five toes on its front feet. Its hind feet have four webbed toes to aid swimming. **(BOTTOM)** Cantrelle pulls a 10-foot alligator to the surface while Bonvillain readies the rifle.

**(LEFT)** This alligator has taken a baited hook. Bonvillain and Cantrelle work it to the surface. **(TOP)** Moments after hauling alligators into the boat, Cantrelle cuts into the tail to insert a Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries-issued tag. **(BOTTOM)** Kyle Champagne measures alligators before loading them into a refrigerated truck.

head and hide only to puncture the floor of his boat. He jumped on the seat behind the captain's wheel, stood up and kept driving.

Then came another tale. Earlier this year, while Bonvillain was out fishing, a four-foot alligator became "intrigued" with his bait. The alligator went for it. "The young ones are curious," he says, rolling up his sleeve to reveal two scars on his forearm. "I just wanted my bait back."

The boat arrives within 15 yards of the one that outwitted them away last season. At once, stealthy as a submarine, the alligator submerges. The casual descent seems more like a challenge than a retreat. After three seconds, the water above settles, and the first bubbles break the surface. Hundreds burst across the black canal, churning the water. Whatever is down there is vigorous and alert, and it's also enormous.

"He's not that big," Bonvillain says.

"We're going to find out how big he is," says Cantrelle.

With one hand, Cantrelle holds the captain's wheel while his other grabs the unbaited hook, which is attached to a 25-foot rope. He hangs over the starboard side and lowers the hook over the bubbles, now long dispersed. Slowly, we drift in the direction we last saw the alligator glide. Cantrelle drags the hook, feeling his way across the bed of the canal.

"You want to hook him in the head," Bonvillain says as he scans the banks in search of new bubbles. "That makes it easier to shoot once you get him up."

"I don't know where he is," Cantrelle says, "but we're going to find him." Another minute passes before he draws the hook from the water. Just then, bubbles appear on the port side, five feet from the bank. The boat turns, and we head toward a tree that Hurricane Ida crippled three weeks prior, its destruction leaving the canal's southeast passage unnavigable.

Once again, Cantrelle lowers the hook into the bubbles. That's when I see it, 10 yards off the bow, something that looks like driftwood with raised bark for brows and nostrils, but this time it's unmistakable — alive and majestic, equal parts beautiful and terrifying.

"*There*," I say, pointing.

Within several seconds, we're on top of a new explosion of bubbles. Cantrelle lowers the hook. What happens next happens quickly. Cantrelle's face clinches. Extreme tension enters his arms and torso. Bonvillain readies the rifle.

**BEHOLD THE AMERICAN ALLIGATOR.** Upon first sighting these predators — imagine their awe — the Spanish used the term *el lagarto*, "big lizard." For more than 150-million years, they have lived in an environment that ranges from east Texas, through all of Louisiana, into parts of Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, North and South Carolina and all of Florida. In "American Alligator: Ancient Predator in the Modern World," Louisiana biologist Kelby Ouchley writes of documented alligator sightings as far away as California, Indiana, and New York. In Louisiana, they inhabit lakes, ponds, bayous, canals and swamps, mostly the coastal marshes of the south. They live, also, in our imaginations. We know they're out there, even if we only recognize them through anecdote — the friend of the friend who returned home to find an alligator waiting on the doorstep — or at Christmastime as genial papier-mâché creatures hauling Santa's sleigh.

Due to management, research, and regulated hunting, in the past 50 years the alligator population in Louisiana has increased from 100,000 to more than two million. That's about two of us for every wild alligator living — make that *prospering* — in our waterways, sometimes in our neighborhoods. Jeb Linscombe, biologist program manager at the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, says that the agency gets, on average, 2,000 "nuisance calls" each year. Across the state, 55 nuisance hunters handle these calls to either harvest or relocate that alligator larger than four feet lurching near the monkey bars.

"It's an average of about 800, and in an extreme year, maybe 1,200, alligators that get harvested or relocated on these calls," Lisncombe says. Those numbers, which range across all 64 parishes but which predominate in the south, have held steady for the past 20 years.

See an alligator in a farm or a zoo and the recognition is immediate: these territorial predators move with patience and grace. See one in the wild, when it's just been hooked and is fighting for survival, and witness the "wondrous power and velocity" that Melville used to describe the leviathan in "Moby Dick."

Pause, now, and consider the welterweight effort of a five-pound bass on the end of your line. Know that a 12-foot alligator can weigh nearly 500 pounds. The one on the end of Cantrelle's line is a 10-footer, weighing more than 300 pounds. See him lean over the starboard side of the boat, tugging at the line. Watch, as instinct fuses with the handed-down knowledge he carries in his blood and bones.

One problem becomes immediately clear. Cantrelle has hooked the tail rather than the head. The tail breaks through the water like an angry and unconquerable dragon, while the head surfaces intermittently, one second beside the boat, a moment later, five feet away. With his rifle ready, Bonvillain has a split second to aim for that quarter-size target. I think about swinging my backpack around my chest for protection, but then the alligator's head surfaces — one second, no more, enough time for Bonvillain to aim and pull the trigger once, a second time.

"When you catch on with that hook, that's raw, pure energy," Bonvillain says as he and Cantrelle slide the alligator into the boat. It happens — seemingly, yet impossibly — with as little effort as Cantrelle exerted earlier to draw in his unbiated hook. With his knife, Cantrelle begins cutting into the tail, six inches from the end. "You tag the tail immediately," he says, sweating as his knife grinds into the hide. "This is what they mean when they say 'tough as a gator'."

Once you receive a license to hunt alligators, there are several ways to obtain tags. One is through private land application. Another is through public land-and-lakes lottery. The allocation of tags depends on alligator nesting density. Terrebonne Parish, Cantrelle and Bonvillain's backyard, has one of the highest nesting densities in Louisiana.

After his knife punctures the hide, Cantrelle inserts and fastens the tag. "The big ones are slick, he says. "They know when it's hunting season. That's why I came up with the hook." He's been hunting this way for 10 years, combining it with hanging lines, the most popular way to harvest alligators in the wild.

Silence descends over the canal. For several minutes it persists, and then it happens. The alligator opens its eyes. She rises, shifts her gaze in my direction, and before I accept my limited options, Bonvillain steps around me to deliver a third shot to the kill spot, which I'm beginning to think needs a new name.

Following the rifle's report, we hear a motor hum in the distance. In the approaching boat are four passengers: Joshua Bridges and his wife, Kristy, along with Kristy's son, Kason Hutcherson, and his best friend, Drake Rhodes. On the floor of the boat before the two 12-year-old boys slump three dead alligators, each between nine and 11 feet. The boys wear flip flops and Crocs. I glance down at my own footwear, heavy boots that I picked out this morning thinking they might provide extra

**(LEFT)** Lucky returns from a successful hunt along the bayous of Terrebonne Parish. **(TOP)** (left to right) Drake Rhodes and Kason Hutcherson hunt alligators with Kristy and Joshua Bridges.

**(LEFT)** Rhodes and Hutcherson, both age 12, are already alligator-hunting veterans.

protection, and back again to the boys' feet. Down their shins runs blood that belongs, I hope, to one of the alligators.

"How many y'all got?" Joshua asks.

"Just the one so far," Bonvillain says.

"She just opened her eyes," I say, wanting someone to notice that she's staring at me.

"You want to use my Magnum?" Joshua asks.

Cantrelle shakes his head. He and Joshua shrug. This season is not what either of them anticipated. Between COVID-19 and Hurricane Ida, both have lost business from the annual tours they count on during alligator season.

"This season is done," Cantrelle says as they discuss clients from Kansas, Idaho, South Dakota and Hawaii who have all cancelled.

Conversation then turns to the market value of alligator hide, or more specifically, its plummeting value. In the past few years, alligator farms have flooded the market, supplying the majority of hide and meat. Many local buyers now purchase alligator meat but not hide. Price for hide has fallen so low that Kristy sometimes keeps sections for herself.

"I've got a seven-foot skin in my closet that's waiting to become a purse," she says. She already makes earrings and shirts and wants to expand her skills. "This way, when people come down for hunts, I can offer them something else."

Because of all this talk about alligators, or more likely because it's Louisiana and between meals, the topic shifts to the best way to cook alligator meat.

"I like them smothered in onions," she says.

Joshua grows animated. "We're not talking about just a few onions," he says. "You've got to get a five-pound sack. Cook it until it's tender. It's almost sweet, that meat. Add some garlic powder, cayenne, hot sauce." He raises his forefinger and offers a pregnant pause to telegraph the significance of what comes next: "You can't have any fat."

Cantrelle nods. "You got to get rid of all the fat before you cook," he says.

The decisiveness of this culinary wisdom ends the need for further conversation, and the two boats separate, each moving in opposite directions along the canal to check lines. On a 12-aught hook, Cantrelle hangs chicken leg quarters, or "whatever's on sale," from a wood clothespin. "Let it ferment in a bucket for a day or two," he says. Since the fresh marsh of Terrebonne Parish contains what Jeb Linscombe calls "some of the most phenomenal nesting areas in the state," Cantrelle doesn't have to travel far to find a good place to hang his line. Once he selects a spot, he dips the chicken meat in water, creating an oily surface to suffuse the scent, before hanging it above the water.

Hanging a line, in alligator hunting, is the equivalent of setting a yo-yo when fishing. Leave either behind and return later to see if anything has taken the bait. Cantrelle set these lines two days ago. There's tension on the first one, a good sign, and Cantrelle begins to haul it in. Within moments, a 10-footer surfaces — this time head first — from turbulent water. The struggle takes 30 seconds. Bonvillain and his rifle are ready for one shot, then another. Together, he and Cantrelle haul it into the boat, where for the next 15 minutes, it rests, belly up and eyes open, near the bow. Then, much like in that tale about last year's 12-footer, it rolls over and rises on all fours. I retreat to the stern while Cantrelle and Bonvillain discuss what to do.

"I don't want to put a hole in the boat," Cantrelle says. Then he aims the rifle. This time, thinking about vital organs, I swing the backpack around and commend myself for the sensible choice in footwear. He delivers the third shot, and we move on to the next line.

Besides hanging lines, another hunting method is to shoot the alligator in open water. Considering the small size of that (supposed) kill spot, this involves sniper-like precision. Joshua Bridges likes to get within 10 yards of the alligator but says that when the shot is open, he's fired from as far away as 100 yards. Like Cantrelle, he also drags a hook. This season, he caught a 10-foot 7-inch alligator with a 6-aught hook. The alligator destroyed the hook.

Back at the dock outside the Boo Boo Inn, a refrigerated truck has arrived from Pitre's Fur in Galliano. More than a dozen hunters from the region form a line, and from their boats and trailers rise the ridged hides of the day's harvest. The hunters come from across generations and gender — some are septuagenarians, others not yet in their teens. Nancy Kelley of Houma has been hunting all morning with her three children.

"After the storm and destruction, it's nice to get out on the water," she says. "It's a whole other world." Six children scurry around her, unloading alligators from a boat and carrying them to the truck, where a technician from the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries records tag numbers and gender, the latter to make sure that females are not overharvested. Pitre's, crew measures each alligator while hunters move from boat to boat, chatting and checking size.

The arrival of boats, the unloading and recording of tags, the measuring and admiring — for an hour this procession continues beneath the warm September rain. Then the boats and trailers depart. The door of the refrigerated truck closes. Soon, it leaves the dock and the Boo Boo Inn behind.

Meanwhile, in the Antill Canal, in the coastal marshes to the south, in bayous and swamps, in waterways across the state, it continues, with more alligators out there, some of them recently hatched after the April-to-May mating season, others as old as 70.

They're out there, visible for many, an imprint on the consciousness for others, wondrous and wise in the Louisiana landscape. ■