

HIGH-TECH EGG HUNT;

Gadgets swell alligator egg harvest and strengthen local multimillion-dollar industry;

LSU expert;

No adverse effect on gator population

By Aaron Kuriloff; St. Bernard/Plaquemines bureau

When Grant Dunaway first took charge of the annual alligator harvest on a huge tract of marsh near Big Mar almost a decade ago, his men spent days wandering the region on foot, finding nests and facing down the enraged female alligators defending them. The results of their weeklong effort? A meager haul of 1,500 alligator eggs and two workers with parasites, caught sloshing through waist-deep mud.

Last week, Dunaway's team collected 10,500 eggs in the same marsh. Their biggest problem? Software conflicts.

"Yesterday, the computer crashed and we lost half a day," Dunaway sighed, fiddling with the cables linking two PCs in the air-conditioned mobile home that serves as his operations base. "I pulled the hard drive and put it in the other computer, but this one is Windows 98 and the other one is Windows XP, so it didn't like that."

Even in alligator farming, times have changed, Dunaway said. Though he wears a trapper's white beard and a camouflage cap, the Florida native knows more about satellite navigation than steering a pirogue.

He'd better. The harvest that runs into August represents the backbone of a multimillion dollar business for Dunaway and his colleagues at Pelts and Skins, a Kenner agricultural producer that harvests alligator eggs from the Louisiana marsh, raises them in captivity for sale as hides and meat, and reintroduces a state-required percentage of adult gators back to the wetlands as next year's egg-layers.

Since the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries began allowing a statewide commercial harvest of eggs as a form of population management in 1986, the estimated number of wild alligators has risen by more than 400,000.

Harvesters' fortunes have risen similarly, with 64 companies statewide competing for shares of a haul valued at \$25 million annually. Pelts and Skins is now the 18-foot bull gator of the industry, by far the dominant harvester in the marshes around New Orleans. It also is the nation's leading producer of alligator products, with an office in Paris, a contract with the chic design house Prada and control of 40 percent of the domestic market, in large part because of Dunaway's success at pulling eggs from this section of south Louisiana swamp.

And much of that success, he said, comes by way of technological advances.

Gator gadgetry

"The whole industry has been changed by the application of relatively common technologies," said Zachery Casey, president of Pelts and Skins. "Demand for alligator is still greater than the supply, so anything we can do to increase supply helps.

"It's very different than when we started out."

The reasons for the differences become obvious during the harvest. Locating thousands of alligator nests with maximum efficiency, for example, requires something more than a pair of binoculars and a map of the wetlands. Specifically, as Dunaway and his team discovered, it requires a helicopter.

At first light on harvest day, a two-person team flies a search pattern over the region, looking for telltale lumps where clutches of eggs are buried. When they find a nest, one person plants a flag in the mud nearby while the other marks the location with a global positioning system receiver. Working at full speed, the team can mark hundreds of nests per hour.

"Once you know what you're looking for, they're pretty easy to spot," said Donald Ansardi, who manages the Delacroix Land Corp. property where Pelts and Skins operated last week. Pelts and Skins pays Ansardi's company \$12 per egg for harvest rights to its extensive land holdings in St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes. "It's the most efficient thing I've ever seen. They've got every modern gadget under the sun."

Dunaway collects the data digitally, then feeds it into a mapping program that locates the nests on a scanned satellite photograph of the area. He groups several hundred at a time by area, then feeds them into hand-held GPS receivers. The GPS units are distributed to teams working in five \$30,000 airboats, who speed into the marsh to do the collecting.

Keeping cool

The collection teams seldom even see alligators.

"If a female gets defensive, you just tap her on the nose with a pole," Ansardi said. "They go away immediately."

Heat actually presents a bigger hazard than angry alligators. The men stack eggs in plastic boxes, four layers per box, packed with straw and placed in air-conditioned storage. They must also avoid turning the eggs over, which jeopardizes the development of the fetus inside. So they know which end is up, they mark the top of each egg with a black pen.

"Those eggs will leave here tonight and be in an incubator at a farm in Ville Platte before tomorrow morning," Dunaway said.

The effort protects a substantial profit-making venture. With domestic alligator prices running about \$90 per animal, Pelts and Skins can expect to gross more than \$1 million annually from this parcel of land alone. And the company owns harvest rights to several neighboring properties as well.

Goodwilled hunting

Because alligators don't breed well in captivity, Dunaway said, Pelts and Skins essentially uses the marsh as a giant maternity ward, returning year after year to replenish stocks at their network of farms.

But such commercial exploitation is beneficial for the resource as well, state managers said.

In the wild, juvenile alligators fall pray to everything from largemouth bass to pelicans, leaving only 10 percent or 20 percent to grow four feet or longer. But when they are raised on a farm, with no predators and a steady supply of food and medicine, their survival rate exceeds 80 percent, Dunaway said.

Because law requires the state's licensed producers to return 14 percent of their hatchlings to the marsh, resource managers said, and because most of those survive, farming operations actually increase the wild population.

"It's a phenomenal success," said Mark Schexnayder, a biologist at the LSU AgCenter. "Harvesting eggs has absolutely no adverse effects on the wild population. It's developed an industry that didn't exist before, and the alligators have come back so much that we harvest about 25,000 per year in a controlled hunt. We've brought the animals back from the verge of extinction to the point where they've become a nuisance again in some urban areas."

Alligators might never have rebounded from the precipitous declines that put the species on the endangered list in 1967, he said, without the state's \$25 million industry fueling population and wetlands-rebuilding efforts. "You don't do that just to look at them," Schexnayder said.

Technology bites back

But successful production, either for profit or for reintroduction, requires a successful egg harvest. And modern tools bring modern problems, as Dunaway learned last week. The helicopter was grounded because of mechanical problems. The computer crashed. The operating systems wouldn't cooperate.

Reminded that technological developments have made the alligator production business significantly easier and more profitable since the days when Islenos trappers represented the backbone of the area's alligator industry, Dunaway laughed.

"Sometimes, it doesn't look like it," he said. "You wouldn't believe how much stuff can break in one day."