

**AMERICAN ALLIGATOR (*Alligator mississippiensis*) PREDATION
ON A FORAGING GREEN HERON (*Butorides virescens*)**

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On 21 August 2011 at approximately 1930 h, I observed a juvenile Green Heron (*Butorides virescens*) foraging on a mud flat during low tide in a brackish marsh. The marsh where this event was observed is called Round Marsh located in the Theodore Roosevelt area of the Timucuan Ecological & Historic Preserve, Jacksonville, Florida. The Preserve is a unit of the National Park Service and is also associated with the Fort Caroline National Memorial approximately 6 km away on the St. Johns River and about 8 km from the Atlantic Ocean.

The Green Heron was stalked and eventually preyed upon by an (*Alligator mississippiensis*) estimated to be 2 m in total length. The alligator stalked the bird for almost 20 minutes in a deep pool adjacent to the mud flat while the bird was foraging. During my observation, the feeding behavior of the heron included crouched standing and waiting behavior, foot stirring, and what appeared to be the baiting behavior whereby insects were dropped in the water as bait for small fish as described in the literature (Holt 1961; Meyerricks 1966, 1971; Davis and Kushlan 1976; Kushlan 1994; Hancock 1999). The bird appeared to drop an insect into the water between the edge of the mud flat and the deeper pool where the alligator was located. The heron's attention seemed to be on some fish when the alligator struck and captured the bird in its jaws and swallowed the bird whole. The alligator then submerged briefly but did not perform any of the characteristic spins in the water, but rather moved off into the one of the channels of the marsh.

Birds are relatively unimportant food for American alligators (Wolf et al. 1987). Delany and Abercrombie (1986) reported that in north-central Florida the food habits of American alligators vary considerably, from insects to reptiles, fish, and birds. Examining the stomach contents of alligators they noted American Coots (*Fulica americana*) and undetermined other bird species. Anhingas (*Anhinga anhinga*), Double-crested Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax auritus*), and White Ibis (*Eudocimus albus*) were found in American alligator stomachs sampled in Florida as reported by Rice et al. (2007). Mottled Ducks (*Anas fulvigula*) have been reported as prey for alligators (Elsey et al. 2004). Taylor (1986) reported finding remains of Mallard (*A. platyrhynchos*), Wood Duck (*Aix sponsa*) and American Coot in the stomachs of alligators collected in Louisiana. Delany et al. (1988) and Delany et al. (1999) list other bird species found in stomachs sampled from American alligators in Florida.

As far as I am aware there are no previously published reports of Green Herons consumed by an American alligator. American alligators are opportunistic carnivores and prey species appears to be related to habitat occupied, alligator size and the size and vulnerability of prey species encountered (Chabreck 1972, Delany and Abercrombie 1986). This note documents a natural source of mortality for Green Herons in Florida. Additional information is needed on the diet of American alligators occupying brackish environments in Florida.

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