

A FEW ALLIGATORS.

BY FRED BEVERLY.

Florida may be called the home of the alligator. Here he finds water and climate exactly to his liking. Further north, the rigors of winter compel him to subside into the mud. His delicately organized system cannot endure cold.

Scattered along the Georgia coast, in the creeks and bayous, they are occasionally seen; but it is when sailing up that wonderful river of Florida, the St. John, that we meet them, in constantly increasing numbers, till nearly every stretch of sandy shore, every half-sunken log, shows one or more.

In the little-known creeks of the interior, and in the swamps of the Everglades, they fairly swarm. But they are not so many now as in former years, for travellers and hunters have reduced their ranks, and rendered them shy where once they were bold. To the hunter of hides, more than to the tourist, is due the diminution, as very few are killed by the latter. A great trade has arisen, and declined, in alligator hides, and a few years ago all the native hunters were engaged in killing alligators. Even the swarthy Seminole Indian was induced to bring in the skin of a reptile his ancestors held in reverence and awe.

Now, though there is little demand for their skins, they are made to yield a revenue to the natives, in various ways. Their teeth, beautifully carved, and mounted in gold, are offered for sale, and boots and shoes are made of the best portions of their skins; while the small alligators are captured, held in captivity until the departure of winter visitors, when they are sold and transported north.

The alligator, although it very much resembles its cousin the crocodile, as you will see by the picture on the next page, is a different animal, and is found nowhere but in America. It is said that a crocodile or two have been killed in our Florida waters; but even if this is true, such instances are extremely rare.

Let us commence with the alligator *ab ovo*, or from the egg, and follow him to maturity, noticing his peculiar traits and the methods employed in his capture.

The eggs are of the size and shape of goose eggs, though a little more rounded at the small end, of a yellowish-white color. They are laid in nests constructed of mud and vegetable substances, which produce heat by fermentation, thus aiding in hatching the eggs.

The maternal alligator always keeps watch near the nest, as the male parent is very fond of young alligator, raw or cooked, and it requires all her diligence to prevent the total destruction of her

offspring. As it is, the old fellow generally contrives to snatch up a few, though the little ones follow close in their mother's wake, spreading out like the tail of a comet.

The young are very nimble, even on land, and when in the water very deceptive in appearance as to size. I remember catching one by the tail, which appeared in the water to be about a foot in length, but it was a three-footer that turned upon me when it was jerked out of the water.

The size of the largest alligator is a matter of much dispute. Every native Floridian has his own story to tell of "that big 'gator," and statements vary, none exceeding twenty feet, most of them being satisfied with eighteen. Tolerably correct information has been obtained of the capture of one sixteen feet in length, but they rarely exceed fourteen.

For my part, though I have hunted in the wildest portions of

The vulnerable points of an alligator are greater in number than is popularly supposed. The statement that a rifle-ball will flatten out upon his side or back is now known to be incorrect. Contrary to the general belief, a rifle-ball will penetrate any portion of the body, if it strike fair.

Is the alligator dangerous? That depends upon circumstances. The only danger to be feared from an alligator, on land, is in his tail. He cannot run rapidly, and, conscious of his inability to escape, he either quietly submits or lashes out furiously with his tail.

They rarely leave their watery abodes, except from an insufficient depth of water or scarcity of food. They seem to scent a body of water a long way, for their trails to them are generally direct. Very few instances have come to my knowledge of any one being bitten by an alligator. One was of a man being seized by the hand, as he was stooping to drink from a pool. It was only by the opportune arrival of aid that he

failed to disperse them. That they didn't eat us I attributed to the abundance of food that, in the shape of young birds, literally dropped from the trees into their mouths. Many were the birds we lost, for as they fell into the water the alligators rushed for them and seized them before we could get them.

I do not think that an alligator will attack man unless he has him at a great disadvantage. They are cowardly, but know their power in the water, and probably would seize a man if they met him swimming beyond his depth.

LITTLE THINGS.

So do not be discouraged, dear children, because you are little, or talk of doing this or that when you are big. A little star shines brightly way up in the sky on a dark night, and yet it may be the means of saving many poor sailors from shipwreck who take it for their guide. And little earnest Christians may do a great deal of good in this world if they try. There is nothing like trying.

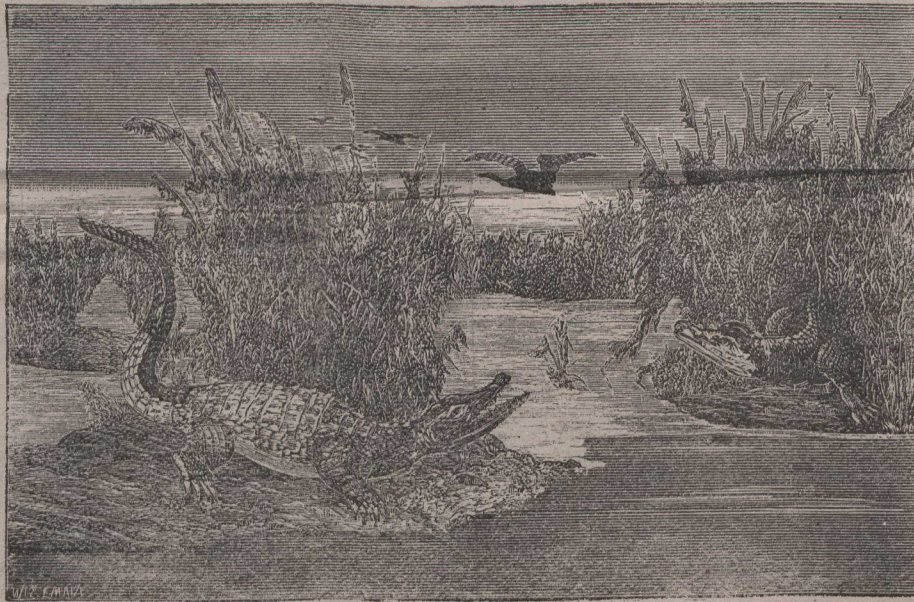
Shall I tell you what tiny insects have accomplished? They have built whole islands.

Once upon a time an eminent naturalist by the name of Foster was voyaging around the world with Cook, and it is said that he first made known the most remarkable characteristics of the coral reefs.

A long way from here, in the South sea, rises a narrow ridge out of the fathomless ocean. Coconut-trees grew on the ridge and little lizards were found creeping here and there, while far and wide no coast nor land was to be easily reached. Who could tell who built this ridge, and planted those trees in the boundless ocean?

Through close study into the matter, it was found that hundreds of years ago little industrious insects called corals lived there. They did not like to build in the midst of the surge near the shore, and they died when exposed to sun and air. After they had been building some time in the bosom of the ocean, they stopped, for they had reached the surface of the water. Then, it is said, there came an earthquake, of which there are so many in the South sea, and the ground sank by degrees, and the tiny corals commenced building again, and went on, and on, until a volcano convulsed the bottom of the sea, and the great reef was suddenly raised above the water, and the little workmen died.

The waves broke off bits of the reef and the constant friction ground them into dust and sand; dead shells, sea-urchins, etc., washed upon the reef, also helped to consolidate it into hard and solid rock. Then the waves carried stray seeds that lodged in the sandy soil, and grew into great trees.



NEITHER OF THEM QUICK ENOUGH!

Florida, I have yet to see an alligator exceeding a length of twelve feet. My guide and myself once captured one measuring twelve feet. We harpooned him as he lay at the bottom of the river, and it was as though we had hitched on to a whale. For half an hour he made the boat spin through the water as it never went before. It took three shots to kill him, but we finally did it, and a steak from his tail was upon our bill of fare that night.

Was it good? Well, I have eaten better meat, meat more to my liking, than alligator steak.

The alligator, at all times, and under any circumstances, emits a disagreeable, musky odor, and his flesh is strongly impregnated with it.

His food is—any and everything. He is as omnivorous, or all-eating, as a crow. Birds, fishes, hogs, dogs, and even chunks of wood, are swallowed by him. Whether the wood is swallowed for sustenance or to aid digestion, the alligator alone can answer.

escaped

They prefer negroes to white men, and hogs and dogs to either. An alligator will follow on the trail of a dog for a long distance, and it is difficult for settlers near the banks of an alligator-haunted river or lake to keep dogs at all.

I recall one of my adventures while hunting some rare water-birds. My friend and myself had penetrated a swamp, and had entered a place where the water was waist-deep, black with mud, and alive with alligators. It was a strange sight to me, and I rather shrank from proceeding any further; but my friend, who had been acquainted with 'gators for years, said there was no danger, and we went in. On every side were the knotty heads and evil-looking eyes of scores of alligators. They swam about us, seemingly more from curiosity than from any other motive, but they gulped up our dog with a rapidity that set my heart a-beating. I shot and shot, as fast as I could, with a breech-loading shot-gun, but