

Alligator Hunting with Seminoles

by Kirk Munroe



For hours the long dugout threaded its way, swiftly, and without a pause, through the maze of narrow channels that everywhere intersect the vast swamps of the everglades like a network of veins.

The occupants of that particular canoe were Miccochee (little chief), a young Seminole Indian; Kowika, his twelve-year-old brother, and myself. We had followed one stream up from the coast the day before and were now skirting an edge of the 'glades toward the headwaters of another river on which we proposed to hunt alligators for their hides. That is, my Indian friends were going to hunt alligators, that being their regular and legitimate occupation in life, while I was going to see how they did it, for the benefit of those readers of this magazine to whom alligator hunting is a novelty.

It is seldom that a Seminole can be induced to guide a white man into any part of the everglades, so jealously do the Indians guard the secrets of this their last place of refuge. Miccochee had not been very enthusiastic over my proposal to accompany him on this trip, but I had once helped Kowika through quite a serious illness, and out of gratitude for this the elder brother finally consented to take me with them. Of course I was greatly delighted at this decision and so was Kowika, for the little chap and I were fast friends.



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We traveled in a canoe that Miccochee had fashioned for himself, aided only by fire and hatchet, from a huge cypress log. It was twenty feet long by three broad, and drew about four inches of water. It was propelled by a sail in open waters or through the treeless expanses of the 'glades, and shoved along with a long pushpole through narrow or forest-bordered streams, or when the breeze was unfavorable.

After several hours our surroundings changed for the better. We were in a stream that was bearing us forward with a very perceptible current, and our canoe was headed toward the belt of cypress that on that side forms the boundary of the 'glades. In a short time the waving grasses were left behind, and we were gliding through patches of mingled shade and sunlight over dark waters of crystal clearness.

About four o'clock, the canoe was beached in a little cove that was canopied by the fragrant and widespread tendrils of a huge grapevine. Beyond it a narrow, grassy glade was fringed by the graceful forms of a group of cabbage palms, so that the whole formed one of the most perfect and desirable of camp sites. At one side of it stood a frame of poles and posts, sole relic of some former camp, and before dark Kowika had thatched both roof and sides of this, so as to make a rain-proof shelter, with the great crinkly palmetto leaves that Miccochee and I cut and brought to him. From my own stores I produced coffee, bacon and hardtack. Kowika started a fire and collected wood, and Miccochee speared a couple of fish. They were of a kind unknown to me, but proved of excellent flavor after being wrapped in aromatic leaves and cooked under a bed of glowing coals.

After supper the 200-pound bag of salt that we had brought with us was "toted" into the shanty to keep it from dampness. Then Kowika made beds of the abundant moss that hung in great bunches from the cypresses.

Until now I had not suspected that all our hunting was to be done at night, but I discovered this to be the case. Darkness had hardly well set in before muttered bellowings began to sound from the stream, both above and below our camp, as well as from the cypress swamp beyond. They were in close imitation of the sounds made by an enraged bull; but I knew that they proceeded from the leathern throats of the very alligators we had come so far to find, for I had learned that lesson some time before. It was given me by a "cracker" with whom I was traveling when I first heard the sound. In my ignorance I remarked that an angry bull was somewhere near us, and expressed surprise, as we were not in a cattle country. At this my companion burst into a loud guffaw, and increased my stock of knowledge by explaining that:



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“Them’s not bull cows a-bellerin,’ they’s bull ‘gators.”

On the present occasion Miccochee listened with evident satisfaction to the bellowing for a few minutes, and then remarked:

“Allapatta (alligator) plenty. Me catch um: uncah!”

I have neglected to mention that during the day we had shot several cormorants, and caught a number of catfish. Just before we started on our nocturnal hunt some of these were tossed into the water, and allowed to float down stream ahead of us, as a bait to attract the alligators.

In noting the weirdness of our surroundings I had almost forgotten the object of the expedition, when it was suddenly recalled with startling distinctness by a blinding flash, a loud report and an exultant yell from Kowika. Alligator number one had ventured out into the stream after a drifting cormorant. He had turned his bewildered gaze toward the approaching light, and, from the darkness beneath it, a rifle ball had crashed into the sluggish brain through one of his glowing eyeballs. The dead body immediately sank, but by feeling along the bottom with his harpoon Miccochee soon found it. A sharp lunge fixed the steel prongs into the scaly side, the shaft was withdrawn with a jerk, and the canoe was headed toward the nearer bank, the coiled line paying out as it went. Two minutes later the dead alligator had been drawn out on a grassy tussock, the harpoon had been cut out, and we were again drifting down with the current.

Within a mile we killed four more of the bewildered monsters, and then turned our prow upstream. Now Miccochee wielded his push-pole from the stern, as only his skill and strength could force the draft in silence against the current. Kowika sat in the middle of the canoe, while I, with jacklight on my head and rifle in hand, occupied the position of honor in the bow.

The only sound as we moved up the stream, keeping close to the bank to avoid the full strength of the current, was the gurgling of water under our bows.

As it was midnight when we again reached camp, I landed and turned in, leaving my Indian friends to continue their hunt as long as they chose.

When I awoke the sun was well up, Micochee was mending the fire, and Kowika was fast asleep on the opposite side of the shanty. We did not wake him until breakfast was cooked.

After breakfast we set forth to view by daylight the result of the night’s hunt. To my amazement those two Indians showed me twenty-four dead alligators, drawn upon the



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river banks within three miles of our camp. They must have continued their hunt until daylight, and could not have had more than an hour or two of sleep when I awoke and found Miccochee already stirring. In spite of this they exhibited no signs of fatigue, but appeared as fresh as when we started on our expedition the day before.

Now began the arduous and to me intensely disagreeable task of skinning the dead 'gators.

In watching the operations of skinning I soon discovered that only the underneath, or belly, portion of the hide was to be taken; that on the back being too thick and scaly to be worked into leather.

Working with the skill of long practice the Indians had those twenty-four alligators skinned and the hides carried to camp by noon. At the camp they were scraped, and rubbed with a liberal quantity of the salt we had brought with us. Then each was rolled as tightly as possible and stowed away inside the hut, beyond reach of the sun. Early in the afternoon their labors were finished, and they flung themselves on their moss couches for a few hours of sleep before darkness should summon them to resume the hunt.

The atmosphere of the hut was rapidly becoming intolerable to my more sensitive nose; so, while my companions slept, I erected a smaller shanty of poles and thatch at some distance from theirs for my own use. Then I prepared supper, the principal meal of the day on such an expedition, and not until sunset did I arouse the sleepers.

For a week longer the programme of the first night and day was repeated with unvarying regularity, until at the end of that time alligators were scarce in that vicinity, and over a hundred hides, none less than seven feet in length, were stored in the hut. For them the Indians would receive from thirty-five to fifty cents apiece from the trader, upon their delivery at this store, thirty miles away.

On its return trip our canoe was so deeply laden with its unsavory freight that it was several times necessary, in shoal spots, to unload her, and make a portage to deeper water. At such times, as I "toted" my share of the cargo and reflected upon its ultimate destination, it seemed incredible that these vile skins would soon be transformed into the softest of leather and worked up into the most expensive of traveling bags, belts, card cases, albums and other articles of luxury. But so it is. Alligator leather is as popular today as it ever was, and it promises to continue in favor until the last of these uncouth monsters, together with the buffalo of the West and the fur seal of the North, shall have disappeared from the face of the earth.

