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info@arkandtent.com[Home](#)[Articles Index](#)[Travel Articles](#)[World Beat](#)[Helping Hands](#)[Pet Projects](#)[Field Notes](#)[Trips & Tours](#)[Reader's Corner](#)[Newsletter](#)[About Us](#)**GATORLAND, USA***An Adventureland in the Heart of Orlando Beckons Visitors to Get a Real "Bite" of Florida Fun***By: Katey Pfeil**

Not far from the bustling Orlando theme park circuit lies an amusement park that offers visitors a pleasant divergence from the hi-tech, roller coaster scene. Since 1949, Gatorland (dubbed the "Alligator Capital of the World") has been delighting locals and tourists alike with its old-fashioned alligator theme park and wildlife preserve, while

successfully capturing Floridian "bayou" culture at its finest - proving that sometimes, simple is best.

Situated at the head of the Everglades, the 110 acres that comprise Gatorland are probably like nothing you've ever seen before, and that's what makes it so unique. What began initially as a roadside attraction eventually transformed into a park that combines the quintessential symbol of the region (the alligator) with an impressive variety of animal shows, petting zoos, swamp walks, breeding facility, bird rookery and educational programs. The park is home to thousands of animals, including some 1,000 alligators and 200 crocodiles which visitors are encouraged to view, learn about, and in some cases, even touch.

Having undergone a few name changes along the way, Gatorland was founded by the late Owen Godwin, an entrepreneur who turned his fascination with "gators" into a world-renown tourist destination. In the early 1930's, Godwin dug an alligator pit in his backyard where he kept several of the oversized reptiles.

Some twenty years later, Godwin's colorful entrepreneurial skills allowed him to open the Florida Wildlife Institute, where he featured backyard attractions such as Seminole Indians wrestling alligators. Godwin also made trips to northern Florida during the summer months, accompanied by a 13-foot alligator named Cannibal Jake, whom Godwin charged curious lookie-lou's a dime to see, and the money he made hauling Jake around allowed him to slowly transform Gatorland into a major tourist attraction.

Of the approximately 4,000 animals that currently populate the park, the alligators and crocodiles are of course the most famous, and provide the draw for the over 400,000 visitors Gatorland receives per year. When pressed for the most popular attraction in the park, Tim Williams (aka the "Dean of Gator Wrestlin") says, "Really, the entire park is popular. I had a man who was visiting with his children the other day make the comment that unlike all the other nearby parks that ran on electrical impulse, ours runs on a heartbeat. I think it sums up what we are all about at Gatorland."



Although the park (still family-owned and -operated) has changed over the years, it's purposefully resisted the pressure to become more "modernized," so you won't find any roller coasters at Gatorland. But what it lacks in glitz, it more than makes up for in 'down home' fun. For example, there's the Rookie Wrestling Arena where for \$10 you can step into a sandpit and have your photos snapped alongside a 9-foot predator with very sharp teeth. (Truth be told, there's not much 'wrestling' going on, as the alligator's jaws are taped shut.)

However, when pressed about the other kind of wrestling at the park (the kind that involves park staff), Williams says, "It doesn't harm them in any way, and really 'wrestling' is kind of a misnomer. It's more about handling. We use them in order to demonstrate some of the neat things about alligators - what they can and can't do. The other day I heard a lady say, 'Wow. I didn't know they had ears!' Really, that's what wrestling them is: it's more about education - like showing their anatomy - than anything else."

But not everyone who visits the park wants to learn solely about gators, and for these visitors the park offers ample alternatives. The swamp walk, located on the southern

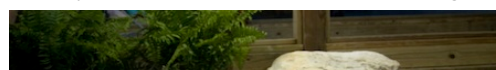


end of Gatorland, is a self-guided tour that takes hikers on a journey through a native cypress swamp via a raised wooden platform. The walk showcases Florida's natural beauty, reminding people what the region looked like before much of the Everglades were destroyed to make room for early settlers. The swamp walk is also a great place to spot (or photograph) some of the area's natural

wildlife that reside within the park's boundaries.

Birders and nature photographers flock to the Bird Rookery (one of the largest rookeries in the state), which offers a prime location for viewing thousands of native Florida birds, of which eight are listed as "Species of Special Concern." Birders can gaze upon many storks, herons, ospreys and egrets, just to name a few. Special birding tours are also offered after hours, allowing visitors the chance to check out the 20 different species of birds that live in the 10-acre rookery.

But if gators really are the main attraction, then there's no denying the lure of the ghostly-white *leucistic* alligators the park is also home to. "There are only 13 known to exist in the world," notes Williams, "and they were all found in Louisiana. A gene mutation causes them to have white skin and blue eyes. The largest is over



11 feet. The ones we have here live in separate pens and are all doing well. In all the years I've been working with alligators, which has been over over 35 years now, I'd never seen one. There's almost zero-odds of seeing them in the wild. But you can see four of them here."



Which just goes to show that even after 60 years, Gatorland is still providing visitors with an experience unlike any other.

FAST FACTS

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Photos courtesy of Gatorland

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