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Warden Guy “Gator” Banks

During my thirty years in wildlife law enforcement, I never met anyone quite like Warden Guy “Gator” Banks. Gator, as he is known to everyone, presented me with a good bit of entertainment as a fellow officer and more than a few challenges as his supervisor. He was a free spirit who played by his own set of rules and didn’t color between the lines. Self-assured, he possessed the enviable talent of being able to talk or fight his way out of most scrapes.

Gator also had an oratory gift for homespun one-liners. His ability to sum up life’s problems in a colorful way led to his cult-like following with a certain faction of Putnam County’s good citizens. Others, however, weren’t quite as enamored with his folksy, often plainspoken manner.

Regardless of how they felt, one thing was for sure. Anyone who picked up a gun, cast a rod, or hauled a commercial fishing net knew who Gator Banks was.

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Gator came to the St. Johns River patrol crew in 1978, roughly a year after I arrived. We first met one bright summer morning at a cottage my wife and I rented at Acosta Creek, a boat marina located on a gently sloping hill north of Welaka, on the St. Johns River. I heard him drive up and walked outside to greet him.



Warden Guy “Gator” Banks (*left*) and the author at the fuel docks of the old Sunset Landing Restaurant, Welaka, St. Johns River, 1979. By permission of Chris Christian.

He stepped out of his patrol sedan, closed the door, and with both hands carefully adjusted the wide-brimmed Stetson uniform hat. He walked up to me with a cowboy-like swagger and extended one hand, “Hi, I’m Gator Banks.” The introduction reminded me of John Wayne striding through the twin doors of a movie-set saloon at high noon. Indeed, at an even six foot, square-jawed, lean, and tautly muscled, he had the self-confidence of a man who knew where he was going and what he was about to do.

It wasn't long, though, before curiosity caught up with me and I asked the inevitable question, the question I would later learn everyone asked him at some point: "How did you end up being called Gator?" Gator, being a natural raconteur, told me the story for a fact.

His father, Fred Banks, was a professional gator hunter back in the 1950s. He caught alligators alive and sold them to tourist attractions up and down the east coast of Florida, which was legal back then.

On the night of December 7, 1951, the night Gator was to be born, Fred was flat broke. He needed cash and he needed it fast. Doctor bills would have to be paid very soon for the delivery of the new baby.

Only one solution awaited Fred: load up the twelve-foot cypress-wood boat into the back of his 1948 Chevy pickup truck and go catch a gator. Fred's wife, Helen, had been in labor for at least a day and a half, so he was in a tricky spot. He needed the money, but he also had to watch Helen. "His logic," Gator explained to me, "was to put her in the boat with him while he hunted. Then he could take care of her if she had any complications."

That night was an unusually warm one for late fall, even in Florida. They caught a hefty eleven-footer down on the St. Johns River, near Picolata, in St. Johns County. Fred trussed the gator up alive and loaded it into the back of his pickup. "It was right about then," as the story was told to Gator by his dad, "that your mama's water broke."

Fred raced Helen to the East Coast Hospital in St. Augustine, where the Police Department is now located. He ran into the emergency room and came back with the doctor and a nurse. "My mother was lying on the front seat of the truck covered in blood," said Gator, "so they popped me out right there.

"The doctor glanced at the cargo in the back of the truck and told Daddy that maybe he should name me Gator. And that's what I've been called ever since."

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We worked the same patrol area on the river for many years until I became his sergeant in 1986. It was as ticklish a job as any supervisor could have, because Gator was something of a nonconformist and



Warden Guy “Gator” Banks checks out the skinned carcass of an alligator dumped by poachers, 1991.

would occasionally break with agency protocol. I thought it had a lot to do with his having left home at the age of fourteen.

Self-sufficiency can come early in life when the tire-storage room of a filling station suddenly becomes your new residence. Gator pumped gas at night and went to school during the day, determined to earn his high school diploma. And he did.

In spite of the motivation behind some of Gator’s choices, he had now come under the intense scrutiny of upper management. One escapade in particular became the catalyst for it all and has since become legend within the inner circles of old-time Florida game wardens. (I was an officer at the time.)

It began one day when Gator was on river patrol. He had become bored and decided he would like to kill some wild hogs (which are considered a nuisance in Florida). Having received an invitation from

a landowner to kill as many as he would like the day before, it seemed like a good idea to start the killing immediately. Why wait, Gator reasoned, when there's nothing happening on the river right now anyway?

So Gator left the water and headed for the woods—in his marked patrol unit, a forest-green 1975 Plymouth Fury III sedan. In what would later turn out to be a fortuitous decision (one that likely saved his career), Gator, to his credit, told dispatch that he was off-duty.

Gator had a simple plan to kill the hogs. Wait by a hole in the fence where they crossed every evening and shoot as many as he could. Achieving this goal required a firearm that could deliver a steady stream of hot lead downrange. A Ruger Mini-14 semi-automatic rifle loaded with two banana clips taped back to back, each holding ten rounds of .223 caliber ammo seemed like it would do the trick. He carried a third magazine for a spare.

Gator had been putting freshly killed game—marsh hens, coots, ducks, squirrels, rabbits, hogs, and deer—on the family dinner table since he was a young boy. “We pretty much lived off our ability to hunt,” recalled Gator. “If we bought processed food, I never knew it. We either caught it or killed it.”

Gator sat on the ground about seventy-five yards from the opening in the fence. Close to sundown, the first hog poked its head through and gingerly stepped out into a clearing. Gator squeezed off one shot and down went the hog. Another stepped through, *Crack*, and then another, *Crack*, and yet another, *Crack*. Then the hogs—close to 150 of them—came crashing through the ragged wire opening in a confused frenzy. A steady stream of shiny brass shell casings arced through the air as the pigs tumbled and squealed.

When the smoke cleared, fifteen to eighteen hogs—Gator's memory is foggy here—lay on the blood-drenched earth. Gator had a problem. He had 1,500 pounds of fresh pork and nowhere to put it.

“How,” wondered Gator, eyeballing his patrol sedan, “am I going to get these hogs to the butcher shop?” He gave it a little more thought, then walked over to the car and tore out the back seat. Problem solved.

Only one small hiccup marred what should have been a perfect ending to the story.

While traveling out of the woods that day (one of two trips), Gator stopped to chat with three deer hunters. One of them remembered Gator very well. The last time they met, Gator had been a Palatka police officer, and the hunter had been riding handcuffed in the backseat of his patrol car—under arrest for disorderly intoxication. He swore to Gator then he would find a way to get back at him.

The ensuing internal affairs investigation was long and vigorous. The man added fictitious details to the story, saying Gator had also killed a doe deer. That was a criminal violation and, if proven to be true, would mean his immediate dismissal.

In the end, Gator ducked a bullet, figuratively speaking, and was able to keep his job. No deer had been killed, but a pile of hogs had, which Gator freely and honestly admitted. His punishment was swift and sure. He was exiled, banished to serve three months of winter night patrol—in December, January, and February—on Crescent Lake. The orders were explicit. He could not leave the water until his eight-hour shift officially ended.

Gator remained undaunted and not the least worried about the outcome of his misadventure, because he had a plan. Not much happened on Crescent Lake when the temperature dipped below freezing. So to comfortably survive the frigid nights, he loaded an extra six-gallon gas can, a portable television, a chair, a thermos of hot coffee, and plenty of snacks into his patrol boat before each shift began. Then he headed straight to Bear Island, at the southern end of the thirteen-mile-long lake. He tied his boat up to a rickety wooden dock and hauled the gas can up to a dry, sandy clearing. He gathered up cabbage palm fronds and dead limbs and then stacked them into a head-high pile, poured out the gas, lit a match, and poof, instant bonfire, and enough warmth to last until daylight. Then he set the TV on a stump, cranked up the late-night shows, and proceeded to make the best of it.

At the end of his sentence, Gator was well rested and raring to go. But Bear Island would never be the same. Scalped clean of all its cabbage palms for fuel, the sun shone brighter there than it ever had before.

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