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Social Networking for Alligators

by Estelle Ford-Williamson

Sometimes I think every person who suffers a loss of physical health ought to receive an indefinite stay on the South Newport River as a way of restoring physical and spiritual power. It worked for me twenty-two years ago when I became one of those people counted as having the “yuppie flu,” an unexplained sudden and profound fatigue that extended several months before it officially got a name—chronic fatigue syndrome. Because I could barely lift my head, much less continue an overwhelming job heading human resources in an Atlanta bank, I had to grasp meaning from a life shredded by a non-performing body, a body that just wanted to crawl under covers and never emerge. When it did emerge, reading was what took some of the tiredness away. And being in nature.

Circumstances—a long-term relationship, a finding of a new family where observing nature and pacing to a slower rhythm were worshipped as a means to health—brought me to this tidal river on the Georgia coast. I eventually would sail it with my husband on our wedding trip, travelling eight miles as the local bald eagle flies, but twenty miles as the serpentine river folds and unfolds east toward the Atlantic. Before that trip was possible, a journey out to the ocean and south to St. Simon’s Island, my first steps in getting back to functioning were helping a crew build a dock by cooking and serving healthy meals and doing all the planning and packing and undoing that the long journeys from Atlanta required.

We camped on the river, and so chattering challenges from tiny, loud marsh wrens woke us every morning. At first, I watched fascinated by each outgoing tide, each emptying of that dark brown elongated bathtub called the South Newport, and every refilling of the tub to the point of overflowing. The tannin-colored waters rose and flooded the marsh so magnificently and frightfully that I wondered when God would turn the faucet off. A low tide might leave three or four feet in the riverbottom, followed by a high tide pouring eight feet of water on top of that. Each flood tide seemed to threaten, to float the land away.

Evening sunsets turned the western sky unbelievable hues of orange, silver, and mauve, and etched those scenes in my memory. One evening as earth was preparing for bed, a great fluttering arose from above my head, a raw squawk, and a magnificent large wood stork took off from a hundred-foot pine tree above our camp site.

So that’s when my healing began. Today, years after my reading became research which became a novel and after my several years of bringing my body up to a part-time work capacity, I was again working on property on the South Newport, and even though property restrictions and houses going up nearby prevented us from camping, I could take a moment for a morning look at the river from our dock. We still don’t have a house there, but the stationary dock sits high above the water, with a ramp down to the floating dock, the one that goes up and down with the tides. A neighbor’s older brother sat in a folding chair on his floating dock, overlooking the water by a couple of feet.

It was high tide and Conrad was looking at a three-to-four foot alligator in the water in front of him, midmorning sun lighting up his skin perfected over the millions of years alligators have roamed this earth. In sunlight, his skin was yellow-brown and black, almost zigzag patterned like a diamondback rattler. The gator was showing his full length, swinging his tail, propelling himself across the dock sitter’s range of view. Conrad was recuperating from removal of most of his colon. Cancer and other diseases had made his legs thin, bird-like, but his curiosity was intact. And, yes, he was talking to the gator, as I had over

years of watching them launch in our river each summer. Sometimes they'd grow to a larger size, but alligator hunting seasons are now declared regularly, so the eleven- and seventeen-foot wonders I'd seen there or on Blackbeard Island Wildlife Reserve are rarer now. But something that's been here since the age of the dinosaurs—you tend to pay attention.


I turned away from our dock near Conrad and continued packing for our trip home away from the river. I envied Conrad his coming adventures in keeping up with the alligators. My husband and I had seen four similar-sized reptiles—probably a juvenile pod feeding on crabs and other small prey—in the same stretch of river the day before. I knew he would heal to the maximum his body was capable of in that Eden, especially if he was in no big hurry. I had learned that hurry was the enemy, and river time was the healer to my body and soul.

I came back to our dock. The gator was gone.

“He disappeared,” Conrad said, pointing across the river at the fast-moving, dark water. Not for long, though. I saw the yellow-brown narrow log heading to the left edge of my dock. Careful to keep the structure between us, the gator was swimming for grasses on my shore—yes, to spy on me, just as I was spying on him. With Conrad, he'd started at periscope depth, just showing eyes protruding above the water like the big eyes of a cartoon frog; then he'd swum full length across his gaze, taking a measure of his human observer. Submerging, he'd stolen forty feet under water and then come up on the far side of my dock. His purpose? Maybe defensive positioning, getting a bead on the enemy.

But as I saw him sneak into tall grasses near my shore and turn towards me, nose only in view, I thought: he's a social critter. Just wants to make sure he's met every one out this morning. Maybe it gets dull talking only to other gators. And everything else runs away from him because he eats them.

Yeah, I thought. Social networking, that's what he's doing. He wants me to be his friend, just like on Facebook.

Should I confirm? 

Estelle Ford-Williamson has published a historical novel, *Abbeville Farewell: A Novel of Early Atlanta and North Georgia*, and her fiction has appeared in *The Louisville Review*. She conducts writing groups, and is at work on a second novel, *Rising Fawn*, again set in Georgia. She and her husband Richard reside in Avondale Estates, GA and spend time on the Georgia coast.

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