

Crocodile Nest at Trout Creek

by NORTON M. BEAN

AS A YANKEE and much of a landlubber I had considerable to learn when transferred to Everglades National Park in the summer of 1952 from the mountains of Virginia to be responsible for the park's Florida Bay District constituting some 370,000 acres of salt water. I came with preconceived notions, as many do, of the abundance of reptilian life in an area of this sort and found as others had before me that, because of the many years that crocodiles had been casually destroyed, it takes a bit of looking and perseverance even to observe a few of these creatures in their native haunts.

On one of my early trips into Florida Bay in company with my predecessor, park ranger David Bogart, we landed on Cup-O'-Whiskey Key where he had found an active crocodile nest in May 1951. An investigation of this nest had been undertaken by the park biologist over a period of several months. This intrigued me, and I had visions of encountering a crocodile lazily sunning himself on a mud bank, or tending a nest on some sandy beach. Such opportunities as that proved not to be easily come by. A pair of eyes, a snout, and a few ripples on the water were all that I was to see of these armor clad denizens of my ranger district for several months. Occasionally I stopped at Cup-O'-Whiskey Key and other nearby keys during the following spring. It seemed to me that what was a good site for a nest one season might be used other years as well, but that did not hold true in this instance.

While low water prevailed during the drier winter and spring months, I took the opportunity of landing on and exploring many of the keys partly as a change from the ever constant patrolling by boat, but more to find out what wildlife, if any, existed on them. Water birds of various species were abundant. 'Coons occurred on some keys which had links with the mainland through shoal areas. But of crocodiles there seemed to be a

dearth. One day on Roscoe Key in early March I found a twisting trail and foot prints which were apparently those of a crocodile, and followed them for some distance and then lost them. At about this same time while Biologist Moore and I were counting roseate spoonbill nests on Bottlepoint Key, we found a crocodile wallowing hole on the interior of the key along the inner edge of the high red mangrove fringe. There were also slides and sunning places in various stages of use that I encountered, as others have, along several of the creeks connecting lakes and bays in the northern portion of Florida Bay.

June 20th of 1953 was to be more productive along the crocodile line. I stopped that day to investigate a small key of relatively high elevation at the mouth of Trout Creek. Heavy rains a week or so earlier had resulted in the season's first really large hatch of mosquitoes so I anticipated a rather short visit. However abbreviated it may have been, it did result literally in a hand to hand contact with a crocodile in the wild.

Where I put ashore on the east side, the key rose rather abruptly to an elevation of approximately three feet and then gradually sloped to the west in the form of a shell beach. Rounding a clump of bay cedar bushes I came upon an open expanse of beach which had all indications of having been rather violently overturned and swirled about. My first thought was of some human use. But then why should it be of such a manner as this, and in so remote a location? Hidden treasure perhaps? In the midst of this disturbed area there were three mounds of sand approximately twenty feet from the water's edge. Two of these were relatively small and a third much larger in size—approximately seven feet in diameter and fifteen inches in height at its center. Surrounding the latter was an extensive area which had apparently been scooped out and the sand thrown onto the mound. These I surmised to be crocodile nests, not knowing what else they might be. To confirm my suspicions I dug into the three mounds. The two smaller ones consisted only of sand. About six to eight inches beneath the top of the larger mound I encountered several ellipsoidal white eggs about four inches in length. I broke one of these open. From it uncurled a well-developed young crocodile about seven inches in length, with eyes and mouth open. The egg yolk was still present and was in the process of being enclosed within the abdominal wall of the youngster. Having satisfied my curiosity, I left the remaining eggs undisturbed and recovered the mound.

Foot prints or tail marks were not evident in the vicinity of the mounds. Heavy rains earlier in the month had undoubtedly obliterated such details, and there is some evidence that these crocodiles may not attend their nests for some time after laying the eggs. The two smaller mounds of sand may have been the remains of old nests, inasmuch as young crocodiles have been reported in this area previously.

Partly because of my being away on leave, nearly two months elapsed before it was convenient to make a return trip (on August 14th) to the sand bar key at Trout Creek to check the progress of the young crocodiles. Nature had evidently run its usual course. Nine broken shells on the beach indicated that at least that many young had hatched and progressed on to the next step in their young lives. A cursory inspection of the now abandoned nest also revealed a number of eggs which had failed to hatch and were now rotten. Life in the crocodile family has its hazards as elsewhere.

