



NEWS

Alligators crawl into Southeastern family



Nineteen baby American alligators, which were rescued by the Oklahoma Wildlife Conservation Department and are being reared by SE biology professor Tim Patton, Ph. D., took turns swimming in the tub and warming up beneath the grow lamps.

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DURANT — A baby alligator swam toward the center of the black tub in the lab and nipped its sibling's tail playfully, and a smattering of guttural barks peppered the air.

"They're always doing that," said biologist and Southeastern Oklahoma State University professor Tim Patton, Ph.D., gesturing to the tub. The gentle trill of splashing water could be heard, and inside, a baby alligator scurried from the water onto a concrete cinderblock to bask beneath the glow of a grow lamp.

The nest of 19 baby alligators, who are five to six weeks old, are the newest addition of the SE family, and they've garnered quite a following.

"It's interesting that we can do a lot of work in obscurity, and nobody ever really shows that much interest," Patton said with a smile. "Then we get something like [alligators]... and then all the sudden people are coming around and they want to see them."

ALLIGATORS IN OKLAHOMA

Patton said Oklahoma is home to a small alligator population in the southeastern tip of the state.

During about the middle part of the last century, the American alligator populations in southeastern Oklahoma were decimated, mostly from hunting or poaching to use their skins for wallets, boot and purses, Patton said.

The alligators were listed as an endangered species, and the protection entailed with the listing, in addition to some efforts to improve the alligators habitats, enabled the alligator population to grow again.

"[The alligators] made it back to Oklahoma themselves," Patton said. "They've been successfully reproducing in Oklahoma for a couple of years."

THE NEST

The Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation, specifically biologist David Arbour, had monitored the baby alligators when they were just a nest of 23 eggs in McCurtain County when he realized the mother alligator was missing, Patton said. Arbour continued to check on the nest for an additional month.

The eggs of baby alligators are usually buried within a nest made of sticks, leaves and debris, Patton said. When baby alligators hatch from their eggs, they yelp. This allows the mother alligator to know the eggs have hatched and triggers her normal response of digging them up, after which, she escorts them to the water and protects them. Female alligators show a great deal of parental care, fending for their young for up to two years, Patton said.

Because the mother alligator had been missing for over a month, Arbour decided to dig up the baby alligators himself when the nest he'd monitored finally hatched, Patton said.

"We don't know if she just left or if she was poached," Patton said. "It's unlikely that she would have left voluntarily. She had a nest."

Arbour contacted Patton, asking if Patton would be willing to rear the baby alligators. Patton agreed.

Rearing the alligators has become a collaborative effort between Patton, SE, the U.S. Forest Service and the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation.

Patton said they plan to keep the alligators in captivity for the time being. Normally, alligators go dormant, or hibernate, in the winter, and as a result, don't grow during winter. Patton said their plan is to keep the alligators in a heated room with grow lights, feed them and keep them metabolically active all winter in order to maximize their growth rates, so that when they release the alligators to their native habitat, their nest site in McCurtain County, they'll have a better chance of survival.

Patton said caring for wild creatures outside their habitat is an anomaly rather than the norm in wildlife management.

"A lot of people think of wildlife management ... as biologists who are growing wildlife in captivity and putting them out into the wild ... but that's really not what it's about," Patton said. "Anytime that we take an animal out of captivity like this, it's kind of a last ditch effort. The best case scenario is to have healthy, reproducing populations with healthy habitats that require little or no human intervention."

Patton said they hope to attach radio transmitters to the alligators when they are released into their native range in order to monitor their interactions with their habitats and survival.

Patton, an assistant professor at SE for 11 years, teaches Ichthyology (study of fish) and Herpetology (study of amphibians and reptiles) among a range of other wildlife biology courses.

Patton is no stranger to research on habitats. His research has focused on Lake Texoma in relation to its habitat and how the lake changes with age and as a result of filling in with sediment, and on the positive impact of a suckerfish on its habitat. Patton also performs experimental work in the lab, in which he studies trophic interactions between species and how energy flows through an ecosystem, in addition to surveys and inventories, mostly for fish and reptiles, for agencies like the Wildlife Department.

From his years of research on habitats and ecosystems, Patton said the rearing of the alligators in captivity is an unfortunate example of the detrimental human disregard for these creatures' homes.

"We hope that these animal can do fine on their own in the wild," Patton said. "It's only when we start excessively reducing their numbers and destroying their habitats that we have to start doing things like [rearing wildlife in captivity] to make sure they can survive. As long as we can maintain healthy habitats, then we can maintain healthy populations."

