

## Why we want Alligators in our Community

### *Alligators and golfers*

Alligators in Heritage Oaks tend to evoke emotional reactions among the residents. One person loves watching them in their natural habitat, while another loathes them and wants them eradicated. But one thing is clear: since there over one million alligators living in waterways across Florida, one cannot ignore them.

In fact there are around 4,000 in the local Myakka River State Park with as many as 120 being seen in one viewing. In Heritage Oaks we estimate the number of alligators spread around our lakes and wetlands to be up to 100. It has been reported that 14 were seen in one day.

Alligators do not naturally regard humans as prey. But they are opportunistic and attracted by splashing or swimming, playing on the bank or small animals near the water. For alligators, people riding in golf carts are not meals on wheels - in fact in Florida there are no reports of people playing golf actually being fatally attacked.

### *Why alligators are beneficial*

Alligators radically change the ecosystem around them to make the best of seasonal changes in water levels — and that's a good thing for our lakes and wetlands. As alligators move from gator holes to nesting mounds, they help keep areas of open water free of invading vegetation. Without alligators our lakes could be inundated with turtles, tilapia, etc. They keep the ecosystem in balance.

The next time you see the alligator from your lake sunning himself or herself on the bank note he/she is one of only less than 4% that has made it to adulthood. He is probably in the sun to digest his lunch or to warm up. Please do not have him unceremoniously removed from the property as it is unlikely he will be re-located elsewhere but rather he will be euthanized.

Remember the species is more than 150 million years old, managing to avoid extinction 65 million years ago when their prehistoric contemporaries, the dinosaurs, died off. As a keystone species he has important ecological roles in helping maintain the structure and function of the natural ecosystems at Heritage Oaks. This magnificent animal deserves our admiration even if he may send chills up your spine.

We cohabit the same space and they will leave us alone if we leave them be. Always show caution and keep a safe distance when enjoying the Heritage Oaks beautiful lakes and ponds; when walking your dog, fishing, looking for that golf ball, and of course with your family's children.

If you walk to a pond's shore and the alligator comes to you, that is likely an indication that someone has been illegally feeding it. This would be one of those few times when we need to call in for removal.

The picture of the alligator was taken by a fisherman walking along *Mahogany Run* in mid December.

