# SEE YOU LATER, ALLIGATOR!

by Terry Matthews-Lombardo

*Think your neighborhood is gator-proof? So did AWSL's Terry Matthews-Lombardo until a scaly friend showed up on her neighbor's doorstep. Here's Terry's firsthand account of the ordeal, complete with some important lessons she and her neighbors learned along the way...*

**PICTURE THIS:** It's a sunny, lazy Sunday morning, and you pop open the front door expecting to stroll out to the driveway and retrieve your newspaper. Only suddenly you realize there's an obstacle between you and that paper. A big, scary, creepy, scaly reptile with huge buggy eyes and a gigantic mouth that appears to be smiling except, well, he's not. Yep, it's a gator, and wow, it's lurking like the unwanted guest that it most certainly is right on your front doorstep. *Gulp!* What do you do?

Well, many who live here in Florida have actually faced that same scenario and lived to tell good stories about it. But others, like me, thought it was only something that happened to those who live around murky water or swamp areas – certainly not in neighborhoods like ours, right here in Altamonte Springs, close to the big shopping centers we all frequent. No gators around here, right?

Think again! A frightening alligator had been spotted in a fenced-in drainage ditch that runs adjacent to our community, but that still put him quite a distance away from any of our front stoops. But suddenly, one morning, the treacherous reptile sauntered up to the walkway leading right up to my neighbor's front door, his 6'7" body lounging eerily on the pavers!
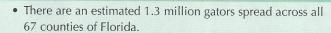
Operating in a state of panic, the neighbor immediately dialed 911 and was then put in touch with a gator trapper. While waiting for the trapper, Mr. Unwanted Gator crawled around to a few other homes as we all watched out the windows from the safety of our living rooms. Word spread of the intruder, and the whole neighborhood was effectively on "gator alert status."

The trapper finally arrived and did just what trappers do. But suffice it to say, our community will never feel gator-proof again.

In an effort to educate myself about the what-ifs regarding gator sightings in domestic locations, I learned quite a bit about alligators in Florida:





*This 6'7" alligator paid a visit to several doorsteps in the Altamonte Springs neighborhood of Terry Matthews-Lombardo.*

- There are an estimated 1.3 million gators spread across all 67 counties of Florida.

- The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) has averaged more than 16,000 gator-related complaints per year for the past 10 years.

- Gator trappers are licensed and work under FWC contract. When a nuisance gator is trapped, it becomes property of the trapper, and due to difficulties associated with gator relocations, the gator, in most cases, is killed and processed for hide and meat.

- The FWC estimates about 7,000 nuisance gators are trapped and killed every year.

- Gators mostly target pets and livestock as prey, but won't hesitate to bite people, especially when aggravated. Since 1948 there have been 22 gator-related deaths in Florida and more than 300 unprovoked bites reported.

**Armed with all this surprising information about how many gator-neighbors we actually have in Florida, here's a summary of what you need to know and who to contact to report a nuisance gator in your pool or on your doorstep:**

- Gators are aquatic in nature and are generally found in or close to water. They will normally only attack if provoked, which is why it can be especially dangerous for you and your pets to walk around the perimeter of lakes or waterbeds, particularly between dusk and dawn, the most active period for gators.

- It is both dangerous and illegal to feed alligators.

- There is no credible evidence that gators will run after their prey, which makes the popular advice, "run in a zig-zag if being chased!" simply a myth.

- *DO NOT* call Seminole County Animal Control with your gator complaints. They don't handle alligators.

- *DO CALL* the following number that is monitored by FWC: 866-392-GATOR.

- Last, but not least: Watch your step as you trek out for the morning paper!