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Reader's Digest

BORN WITHOUT A FACE

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"MEGAN . . . come, Megan . . .
Meegaan!"

An enormous alligator had rounded the curve of the lake shore and was bearing down on my Aire-dale. The cold, brownish-yellow eyes, gliding just above the opaque water of Otter Lake, were fixed on Megan, my companion, my friend for three years.

As the beast sped into the shallows, I could see the ugly white spikes of teeth protruding from its crooked jaws. Megan, bewildered, was almost out of the water, swimming toward me, unaware of the danger. Her feet hit the bottom.

She's going to escape.

But the black, plated reptile put on a horrible burst of speed. Suddenly it seemed to lunge upward, its webbed front claws spread menacingly apart. It was as if *Tyrannosaurus rex* had come to life.

Then the alligator struck, clamping its jaws on my pet. It twisted and rolled, dragging Megan down into the mud and weeds.

It's killing Megan. . . .

With a cry of rage, of instinct, I found myself leaping onto the back of the thing attacking my dog.

Megan and I had been swimming in the lake for two years and had never been bothered by alligators. I had seen them—shy, wild creatures that sank out of sight when approached by humans.

Perhaps weekenders had fed this one fish heads until it had lost all fear of man. But the water table had been low, swamp areas had dried



When the alligator attacked,
instinct took over

Ordeal at Otter Lake

Condensed from AUDUBON

JACK RUDLOE

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not see Megan; I would never see her again.

I boiled up to the surface, filling my lungs with air. When I could breathe again I let out the mindless cry of a wounded animal. Finally, I scrambled up on the shoreline yelling incoherently.

With horror, I turned and looked at the empty lake. Its calm waters mirrored stacks of white puffy clouds, and moss-draped oaks. It was as though nothing had happened.

I fled to my car feeling betrayed, assaulted, robbed. I spun out onto the highway and raced toward home, still screaming.

FOR DAYS I remained shaken and depressed. I missed Megan terribly. I kept seeing her golden shaggy face looking at me in bewilderment as I urged her out of the lake. Over and over again, in my mind's eye, that big black head closed in on her.

I was glad to be alive. And I shuddered when I thought that in the spot where Megan was attacked, my wife and I had taken our ten-month-old baby swimming.

For 20 years, I had been involved in environmental causes, trying to save little-blue herons, turtles and alligators from man's technology. I knew the importance to the ecosystem of these beasts, the last of the dinosaurs. In fact, without

them the swamp would be a poorer place. But now, in the aftermath of Megan's death, I found myself torn.

It was three weeks before I returned to Otter Lake. My wife and I launched our canoe. I wanted to see the alligator again, to begin healing the mental wound it had inflicted, to restore it in my mind to its proper place as a living, flesh-and-blood animal.

Suddenly, there was an explosive splash; a swirl of water, and an alligator surged ahead away from our canoe. For a moment the hatred and fear returned. I wanted nothing more than revenge.

But the lake was on a wildlife refuge. I had been in the wrong swimming there, not the alligator. This was his home.

Watching him, I realized that he wasn't a demon, just a simple alligator, essentially unchanged for 60 million years, programmed to eat living things he finds in the water.

The alligator looked at us boldly. It was just a matter of time. He was too defiant. If not this year, then next year he would be destroyed as the nuisance he had become. And when that happened—even though he had dragged me through hell and killed the dog I loved—it would be a tragedy.



April brings National Library Week. Let's all whisper three cheers.

—Bill Vaughan, NANA