

https://diananyad.com/swimming-with-alligators/384/

Go

AUG

SEP

OCT



2 captures

20 Sep 2010 – 30 Oct 2010

2010

2011

About this capture

Diana Nyad Extreme Dream

BRAVABODY

PHOTOS

THE DREAM

ABOUT

PARTNERS

SWIMSUIT

BLOG

DONATE!

04
AUG

Swimming With Alligators



The 24-hour swim puts me in mind of another of Diana Nyad's long training swims, one that preceded her first Cuba to Florida effort in August 1978. That was a hot summer in South Florida (is there any other?); Jaws 2 had just come out (Diana was disappointed that none of us swim handlers had the stomach to see it with her); and we were preparing, much as we are now, for the uncertainties ahead. But can anyone anticipate what capricious fate has in store for you? And not only from sudden shifts in ocean wind and weather, but also from what arises from shallow waters of the subtropical wetlands of the Everglades, where one swimmer I know did her big training swim 30 or so years ago.

The 24-hour swim which took place on July 10 of this year, involves an even bigger effort. Such an ocean swim challenges the imagination. On the practical level alone, it is a monumental undertaking: garnering the expense money, boats, permissions, crew, lodgings, provisions; then there's the planning, the navigational tools, the shark-repellent devices, the strategies of who goes where when and in charge of what. Meanwhile, Diana somehow still has to get in the training, and she does, leaving her very little time to worry about which way or how fast other currents are flowing. Besides, fretting is not her inclination; it's ours. The long-distance swimmer's will and determination are in defiance of the vagaries of fate. So Diana's eyes, when not turning to look through goggles on each step of breath, are envisioning the goal ahead. My eyes on the other hand, as swim handler 30 years ago, darted furiously from side to side, ready to catch any threat looming. And on that day along the Okeechobee Canal, I was glad they did.

I had been looking forward to my first experience of a swamp—being on the boat, bird watching, sniffing fresh air outdoors all day and night—until the evening before, when it really sank in. Having grown up in Florida, Diana assumed everyone knew that Florida swamps have alligators, but as a California native, I hadn't thought of it. (I shouldn't blame it on being Californian; before I was 30, I assumed that Ivy League colleges meant schools that had ivy growing all over them.) My distance vision was sharp though, so I'd functioned as "shark-spotter" on the ocean swims. That evening before the Okeechobee training swim, Diana informed me it would be my job to watch for alligators along the edges of the canal tomorrow. Oh really, I said, wondering what they really look like in person.

In those days, of course, nobody could look up stuff on the Internet. Besides, it's always a better idea to go ask an expert, which to me is a person with hands-on, real-life experience (and of course they never live in your own hometown). The boat captain whom I sought to describe the nature of alligators said: "Look along the edges of the water, sure, but in the day you won't see much—you can only see 'em at night when your flashlight reflects off their eyes. They're camouflaged pretty good and sometimes they're under. So at night, if you see two beady orange glows anywhere...well let's put it this way, they won't be fireflies."

I received assurances that alligators are not as aggressive as crocodiles, and while this boosted my admiration for Ava Gardner's going to Africa for a classic film of yore (oh yes, I'm a throwback), this did very little to loosen the tightening in my throat. Nobody seemed too worried about alligators. Especially Diana was cavalier, merrily packing

Diana Nyad

facebook



twitter

Join the conversation

Donate



her swim bag and joking, "They only eat you if they're crossing from one side to the other and they accidentally run into you. Besides, they tend to be slow in the heat of day."

"But what happens when the sun goes down?" I asked. "Do they swim faster than you swim?" As to so many of my questions that anticipated the worst, then as well as now, the answer was silence, and in that I heard, Yes.

Diana was on her way at dawn, ourselves following in a boat that made foul noises in its effort to avoid running over her. Though she had outpaced men to break records in the sport of marathon swimming, and sped around Manhattan Island in world record time (breaking a mark held for 50 years before her, becoming the first woman to circle it), the Nyad chose the maximum speed of the world's slowest leviathan as her steady pace for the ultra-distance swimming that came later. Diana and I had yet to swim with whales in Patagonia, but just looking at the meditative stillness around her forward motion along Okeechobee Canal, I understood why these magnificent leviathans came to be called "Right" whales: the "right" whales were the ones easiest to chase down and kill. Also, they were curious-minded and would approach even whalers, their unforeseen predators, as if opening to some new thing.

The day was long and hot and buggy, Diana still stroking steadily as usual, and my eye crisp as on the morn, ever on the alert for an alligator crossing. Because yes, I'd already seen plenty lurking along the shores, first one on the right, then the left, lugubriously blinking or just stock still. I wasn't fooled. They looked, well, reptilian; couldn't trust 'em for a minute. Yet we had to. Diana had said only to blow the whistle if we saw one crossing in front of her; then she'd look and decide. Other than that, it was business as usual. Apparently the usual was to carry a gun with you around alligators, and the captain's mate had one. So I had to keep my eye on him, too: much as I love my friend, we were visiting the alligator's home and far better to leave quietly if signalled *not welcome* than to shoot the host.

By dusk I was almost affectionate toward the fellows, reptilian ones and otherwise. We'd seen alligators everywhere along the edges and the canal was narrow, but nothing had happened, Diana was swimming strong into the night; all was well. I'd almost forgotten that it's at night when reptiles tend to get active, when on one of the sweeps of my gaze from right to left, my eyes stopped a quarter of the way. Just like the in the movies, that deceptively slow, foreboding, floating log with a tinge of green. I was first to see it and blew my whistle loudly—the signal, three extended times. Diana was the second to respond, and, well, Olympic speed wouldn't come close to how fast she got back to the boat (she's a quick decider). And the guns were the third response—shots fired—but thankfully, all-day yacking about how good it would be if we didn't actually have to shoot an alligator prevailed. I don't know where those bullets fell, but not on our watch.

TheCandaceBlog.com July 5, 2010