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WILDLIFE

Why Reggie should stay

- The elusive gator may actually be helping Lake Machado.

By Jordan Rane, Special to The Times

LIKE most East Coast transplants, Reggie has adapted well to his newfound home in Los Angeles.

The 7-foot alligator that's lived in Harbor City's Lake Machado since June has spawned a fan base, at least one dedicated blog, a "free Reggie" T-shirt business and a growing reputation for humbling out-of-state gator wranglers and city officials determined to catch him. He has clearly garnered more media attention in eight weeks than his ailing domicile — Ken Malloy Harbor Regional Park — has mustered in the last 20 years.

Liability issues aside, Reggie (gender unknown) is coldblooded proof that a neglected urban L.A. park can be surprisingly gator-friendly. And, experts say, with ample critters to eat and a healthy immune system, he could thrive for quite a while in his adopted home. There may even be a slight upside to the park's most anomalous nonnative to date.

"I hope he's eating the *Natrix* water snakes, red-eared slider turtles, bullfrogs and nonnative fish — all invaders that have wiped out many of the park's native species," says Lomita-based naturalist Martin Byhower. "This alligator can't stay forever, and God forbid if any more are dumped in there. But in the meantime, I see it like hiring goats. For a while, it can do some good."

A stressed ecology

LOTS of things have existed in this park over the millenniums. Saber-toothed tigers, grizzly bears and at least a few hundred bird species have all reportedly thrived in this no-longer-ageless patch of willows, wetlands and barbecue grills hemmed by the 110 Freeway, Vermont Avenue and an oil refinery.

Largemouth bass (sizable, edible ones) not too long ago inhabited the 240-acre park's centerpiece, Lake Machado. A tenacious homeless population has claimed the park's north end. Pets are abandoned in the park — dogs, cats, guinea pigs, you name it — joining an increasingly distressed ecology that local naturalists have called the largest remaining piece of native riparian forest and freshwater marsh in coastal Los Angeles, albeit one warped with years of pollution problems and invasive species. But now all eyes are peeled for Reggie, who's enjoying the hot, dry weather, eating up sunfish and carp, bullfrogs and turtles — and hiding out.

"The American alligator is a species that's more than 2 million years old," says Louis Guillette, a professor of zoology at the University of Florida in Gainesville who lives on a lake that's home to a 10-foot alligator. "It's really an amazingly resilient and flexible animal."

Guillette has no doubts that as long as this alligator's food supply lasts ("They'll eat just about anything") and as long as its environment doesn't become overly toxic ("They really do have pretty incredible immune systems"), it could do just fine right where it is for years.

Judging from its size, the alligator has just reached sexual maturity, which may be the reason why it was set loose, says Guillette. "This is when they start to get more aggressive," he says. Two San Pedro men were arrested Aug. 24 on suspicion of dumping the alligator.

How much bigger could it get?

"If it's a male, probably up to 13 feet," says Guillette, adding that it may well prove even tougher to catch when cooler weather and shorter days make the alligator leazier and less active.

The best time to catch an alligator, he says, is spring, when the mating instincts are strong.

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The fear factor

THERE are liabilities that come with having a loose alligator in a city park for a single day, let alone several months or years. And there are relevant, if remote, dangers too. The dangers aren't unlike those that Californians unblinkingly face when hiking in mountain lion habitat or surfing in waters shared by great white sharks. The fact that South Bay parkgoers are about as familiar with alligators as they are with saber-toothed tigers is its own small fear factor — drawing unprecedented crowds and city officials to a park and its now fenced-off lake.

So just how menacing is one alligator hiding somewhere in a 40- to 50-acre lake with a decent food supply?

"Attacks are very rare even in Florida, where there are lots and lots of alligators, but they do happen," says Guillette. The greater risk in Lake Machado concerns children or pets at the water's edge. "A gator can lunge half its length in a flash," says Guillette, "so if you're back about six or seven feet from the water, you're probably fine."

To lend some perspective, the Florida gator specialist adds this: "I work on lakes where there are hundreds of full-grown alligators, and there are families out there everywhere fishing in little bass boats. This isn't a Nile croc you're dealing with, or something out of the movie 'Lake Placid.' It's really a different beast altogether."

There is now community support for this beast. It includes a City Council group in Harbor City that recently held an appreciation night for Reggie, and a group of pollsters at Harbor College who want to change their official mascot to ... guess what.

Then there's Byhower, who sees a real opportunity for the park itself. "I understand the liability fears," explains Byhower, a science teacher, co-president of the Palos Verdes-South Bay Audubon Society and vice president of the park's advisory board, "but can you imagine if this panic ensued because there was one alligator at a park in Florida? At least people are starting to come and say, 'Hey, there's a pretty nice lake here.' What I'm also hoping they're saying is 'Wow — this place is poorly maintained, and only a small area of it is actually maintained at all.'"

Byhower, who has spent years directing cleanups, leading birding groups and familiarizing himself with the park's diverse and sprawling grounds, believes that the alligator won't be caught anytime soon. "There are just too many places where it can hide that are extremely hard to access."

In the meantime, city efforts are focused entirely on catching the alligator. "I think Reggie could boost the L.A. Zoo's ratings tremendously," says Los Angeles Councilwoman Janice Hahn, who is now getting wrangler offers from all over the country while also expressing concern that the alligator's residence in Lake Machado may turn out to be a long-term thing. "Priority No. 1 is catching that alligator. But I also think we have to seriously consider our options in light of the fact that he may not get caught."

TASKS:

- 1) Summarize the text.
- 2) Give arguments for and against the conservation of the alligator.
- 3) Could something similar happen in the place where you live? Give reasons.