

On Safari - St. Augustine Alligator Farm



When I was young (not that I am not still young) but, I'm talking single digits young, my parents took my brother, Kris, and I to Florida for a family vacation. On our way from Illinois, we were assailed with billboards proclaiming the "World's Best" this or "World's Largest" that and Kris and I wanted to go to them all. My parents, John and Donna, well mostly Dad, proclaimed all of them to be "tourist traps". I am not sure if he actually believed that or if that was his defense to avoid stopping at all of them. At any rate, Kris and I won one of the arguments and we went to the Alligator Farm in St. Augustine. I had the good luck to go back to the Alligator Farm recently and although the World's Largest Alligator is still there, now a taxidermy enabled ride for the kids, it is not a tourist trap. They actually are the only zoological park in the world that has every species of alligator and crocodile on exhibit. However, crocs and gators are not the prime reason for a photographer to visit the Alligator Farm...it's the birds that rule the roost here!

One of the exhibits at the park features a very real Florida swamp habitat. It is also fairly large at about two acres. This habitat has attracted a huge number of breeding water birds that nest and raise their young along the boardwalk that wanders through the exhibit. Amanda Whitaker is the curator and she told me that herons and egrets look for heavy concentrations of alligators to use as a natural defense against the raccoons and opossums that would normally eat the bird's eggs. The ultra-heavy concentration of alligators (85 actually) in the swamp attract a lot of nesting birds. There are 70 or so nests and they are as close as 3 or 4 feet from the boardwalk.



They are very photographer friendly here and in fact offer a yearly pass (\$59) that allows unlimited admissions. More importantly, you may enter the park early, at 8:00AM. This is an hour before civilians and their young are allowed in the park. This is important as the wooden boardwalk can feel like it is a rope bridge when a bus load of school kids come blasting through. As an annual pass holder, you are also allowed to enter their photo contest. In the spring the light is not as much as an issue as the privacy. Well, it is not

exactly private. There is a gang of geriatric photographers that shoot here often. I promise you that their big glass and Wimberley heads weigh more than they do. They are there ready to go at 8. It is also important to know that this early entry is a courtesy of the staff. One of the employees will come and open the door at 8 and let you in. They only let the people in that are there and ready to go at 8. If you miss the 8 o'clock opening you might as well go enjoy breakfast at the Oasis down the street, as you now have to wait until 9. So be at the big red doors at 8 sharp! When you are in early it is nice as everyone is a photographer and they walk lightly. Everyone leaves bags and gear and stuff all over the place. The boardwalk itself is about 100 yards or so long, but the "hot spots" are fairly concentrated. Most of these guys leave by 10 or so. I have stayed all day before and while I don't leave things laying around after 9, I didn't find the crowds to be intrusive.

In March the birds begin to arrive and build nests. This is a great time for flight shots. Since you know where they are going to land, you can track them back to the nest and get some nice images. If you miss, they are going to do it over and over again. In April, you start to get chicks. May through June, you have tons of chicks as all of the nests should be hatched by now. May is also cool as the gators begin to get active. Not only they lurking under and occasionally shaking the mangroves that house the birds they are also looking for love. The mating bellows of the big guys echo through the park and really makes you feel as if you are out in the middle of nowhere.

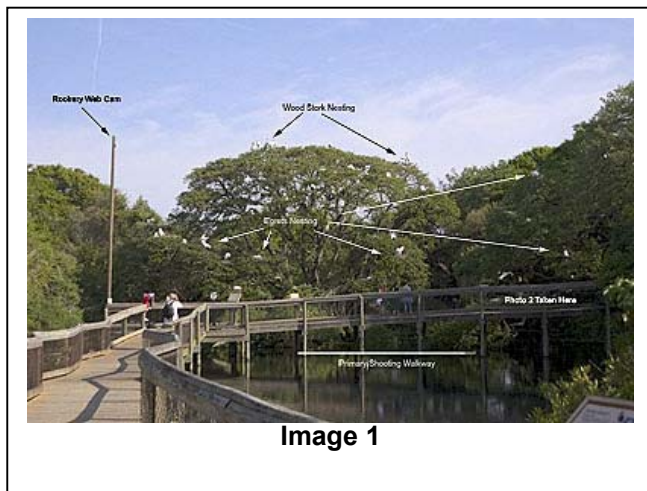


Image 1

The Rookery is easy to find by following the signs towards the Florida Swamp. Turning left at the outdoor amphitheater gets there the quickest, but you should take time to look around the rest of the park. I took a couple of pictures to help talk about the photography at the rookery. The bird locations are pretty general and you will find birds all over the place. The first birds to arrive and the bigger birds take the prime spots. At the "egret" location on the far right you are 10-20 feet from nests. The primary shooting space puts you within 20 feet of a nesting area that cannot be seen in the picture and there were tri-colors and green herons there. The large tree in the background is perhaps 40 feet back and is full of egrets and

wood storks. The wood storks take the top of the tree for their nests and are pretty tough to shot without a long lens. With a short lens you are shooting straight up in the air. They frequently circle the swamp prior to landing and so you can get some nice flight shots. If my bearings are correct you are looking SE in image 1. This means that the close nests on the right don't get much sunlight until late in the day.

In Image 2, you get the reverse perspective. There are tons of egrets in the far left spot. As you can see you can also shoot straight at the site from the boardwalk, but it is a long ways. I put a tele-converter on Betsy and was just able to get the chicks. When you are shooting the birds from where I took image 2, you are within a hand span of birds. I actually took some shots with my 24-120 of nesting birds in that area. The boardwalk continues another 50 yards beyond what you can see here. This is the way, I generally enter the rookery. It goes past the alligator feeding show and on back to the rest of the park. There are lots of birds along the way. The later in the season that



Image 2

you go, the more birds there will in that area. The edge of the park follow the right side of the boardwalk about 15 feet or so away. They are planning an expansion of the swamp in that direction.



There are many birds to photograph. I was able to shoot, Great Egrets, Snowy Egrets, and Cattle Egrets. Large numbers of Great Blue Herons, Little Blue Herons, Tri-Color Herons, Black-Crowned Night Herons and Green Herons also easily photographed. Spoonbills and the endangered Wood Storks also roost here at the Alligator Farm. People get really engrossed with these water birds and may overlook the numerous song birds. I got some very nice images of birds like Northern Cardinals, Bluejays, Red-Winged Blackbirds, and Grackles. There are obviously many alligators and crocodiles to photograph as well.

Some of them are in photo friendly enclosures, but many are not. They also feed the alligators in shows twice a day. When I was here with mom and dad, they told us the alligators were likely all stuffed since they didn't move – I think they were secretly re-enforcing the “tourist trap” thing... They certainly move now. When they leap up about 4 feet out of the water for a treat you know that are not stuffed. The light is not great at the feedings, but the action certainly can be rewarding. There are some exotic birds around as well, but most of them are not in photo friendly enclosures. You can feed the emus and they will come up and beg, but the enclosure is not terrific. If you need an emu portrait, I promise you can get it here.

Nuts and Bolts

The Alligator Farm is at 999 Anastasia Boulevard (A1A). They can be reached at 904-824-3337. The GPS coordinates are N29° 52.736' by W81° 17.454'. Their website is www.alligatorfarm.com and they have a webcam on the rookery. There is also a yahoo user group, <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/birdrookery/>. Amanda, the curator, is quite active on this site and frequently updates the conditions at the park. She also answers almost every question that is posted. She is also always at the park and a super person, so be sure to say hello.

Food and facilities are available at the park. Parking is good, but they do run out. If you enter early with the photo pass there is no problem. You also get in and out privileges with admission so you can go download if needed.

I have never stayed late, but I did hear that they don't rush the pass holders out of the park, often waiting until well after the 5:00PM closing. In the spring this could bring the sweetest light for the left side of photo 2. A gratuity to the staff that stays late for the photographer is an excellent idea.

For the most part a lens in the 400mm should be adequate. I shot some birds with my 24-120 for up close nesting and then my 70-200mm for flight shots.

Getting There

Jacksonville is the closest large airport at about 55 miles. It is an easy trip down I95 to St. Augustine. Orlando is 106 miles. Daytona Beach has a regional airport and is 60 miles away.

Hotels

It is important to stay on the east side of the Bridge of Lions. The traffic gets shockingly bad crossing the water.

Edgewater Inn – At \$59 this is one of the more expensive of the budget minded hotels. The thing that I liked was that the rooms opened up on to the water. Literally, 10 feet from your patio door you are in the water. There were lots of pelicans and shore birds to photograph. Also, there were interesting sunrise shots of the historic part of St. Augustine. The rooms were large and clean.

Historic Inn - \$35 for a room at this relatively new hotel is probably the best bargain.

Restaurants

Harry's – Is one of my favorites. Although french fried jumbo shrimp is not on my diet, I had to try it as it was a favorite from that first trip. It was also quite good. The restaurant specializes in New Orleans style food. They know what they are doing and make an authentic po-boy! Don't be tempted by the steaks....

Oasis – A great beachside dive. Good food, large portions, low prices and cold beverages. It is also a sports bar so, if you get rained out this is a good place to spend some time. This is not a secret spot and so the lines can be long.

Captain Jacks – I could not bring myself to join in with the over the hill gang, but I did hear good things about this restaurant.

Miscellaneous

Trade Winds – This little dive bar has live music, Jimmy Buffet knock offs, and cold beer. No food, but if you just want to have fun this is a good spot.

St. John's County Public Library – They have public access computers and if you cannot get online from the hotel you can come here to get your email.

Anastasia Beach – Anastasia is across the street from the Alligator Farm and is a state park and the home of a nice big lighthouse. I met a photographer there named, Bob. Bob collects lighthouses and says that this is one of the 38 that are still around in Florida. He had lots of advice. I was bitter about taking the perfect flight shot, except that it was not in focus....OK David, it was not perfect, but the composition was a stunner. Anyway, Bob said if it was out of focus, it was art. Bob knows photography. He took the best picture in Detroit - 2 years running! I liked Bob.

Overall Ratings

Photography – ♥♥♥♥, truly a don't miss/can't miss location

Location – ♥♥♥, 3 because it is kind of isolated

Access – ♥♥♥♥, early admission rules!

Staff – ♥♥♥♥, if there were more than 4 hearts they would get that as well...

