

Daisetta sinkhole becomes private pool for 7-foot gator

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CINDY HORSWELL

DAISETTA



Workers standing on the rim of a giant sinkhole that formed last week in this Liberty County town gasp and point as the water inside the cavity starts to ripple.

The first thing visible is a long snout. Then the creature begins to undulate through the water, with its muscular tail and back forming two humps, before vanishing beneath the surface as quickly as it appeared.

Sightings of a 7-foot alligator, although rare, have been reported since shortly after May 8 when the ground collapsed a block from the high school and fire station.

Residents believe the reptile was washed into the 600-foot-diameter crater with water from the swamps that surround the town. Once plunging more than 260 feet deep, the sinkhole is starting to turn into a lake.

Ground water is seeping into the hole from the bottom while marsh water has gushed from the top. Authorities estimate the lake is at least 75 feet deep and is still rising. The exposed walls of the sinkhole are about 30 feet high.

Workers dismantling storage tanks teetering on the sinkhole's rim had initially mocked reported sightings of an alligator. They had spent hours on the rim and seen nothing — until about noon on Friday.

Now they are believers. An alligator is indeed inhabiting this spot, using the sinkhole for its own private swimming pool. A Texas Railroad Commission employee snapped photographs for proof.

"He must love oil," one worker remarked.

Texas Parks and Wildlife game warden, Danny Diaz, said the patch of gooey crude floating on the east side of the crater might irritate the alligator's skin, but he is using the water on the other side.

"It's not really safe for anyone to climb down into that hole now to get anything out," said Diaz, pointing to stress cracks in the ground that encircle the hole. "The sinkhole could start growing again, especially if we get a saturating rain."

The commission is still studying what may have caused the collapse and if other underground voids might cave-in later. As a precaution, the public is being barred from the site and a portion of FM 770 that passes by it.

But some have not been able to resist slipping past the orange barriers to sneak a peek.

"I've been over there every day and only seen the alligator once," said Connie Rerich, 19, who works as a volunteer firefighter and is a clerk at the town's grocery store. She said the reptile was floating on top of the water and then dropped below the surface like he was riding an elevator.

She wasn't too surprised, because she said many alligators populate the bog that surrounds the old oil field town.

Harry Coplin, 74, doesn't believe anyone is worried about the alligator taking up residence.

"Some of the workers at a propane gas plant that shut down here used to feed their leftover sandwiches to 9-footer that lived right back in there," he said.

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