

They found a gator in the Chicago River? Believe it



Tribune photo by Alex Garcia

The alligator, found Friday in a woody area near 37th Street and Racine Avenue, was 4½ feet long and about 45 pounds.

By Mary Owen

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Terrible things have emerged over the years from Bubbly Creek, a spot in the Chicago River that was once a churning sewer for the city's slaughterhouses.

But until Friday, nobody had seen what Bill Cox and his co-workers saw—something with a devilish underbite, sinister eyes and a cold-blooded appetite.

An honest-to-goodness alligator in the Chicago River.

“It just stayed submerged with its eyes popping out like in the documentaries,” said Cox, director of human resources for Midland Metal Products. “It was in stealth

mode, I think.”

Cox was among about a dozen Midland employees who spotted the female alligator swimming laps near a secluded industrial area in the Bridgeport neighborhood.

The American alligator may have been a long way from home, but she looked docile in the water. Her demeanor changed after she was trapped by volunteers with the Chicago Herpetological Society.

The thrashing, hissing transplant—estimated to be 5 years old—was put in a plastic container and spent the next few hours snapping



Aerial attack artists also on the prowl

As if alligators in the river weren't enough to worry about, the male red-winged blackbird is aggressive and bringing attitude to city streets in the middle of nesting season. **PAGE 18**

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at TV cameras and people who came to meet her in the Midland parking lot. The American alligator is one of the strongest and most aggressive of reptiles native to the United States, experts said.

It's illegal to own alligators and other exotic reptiles in Illinois, one of about 30 states with such a ban, officials said.

"These are not nice animals," said one of the volunteers with the herpetological society, who asked not to be identified to avoid being inundated with requests from naive pet owners to remove reptiles. "These are powerful

things, and they are dangerous."

The alligator discovered Friday was 4½ feet long and about 45 pounds. At full maturity, she would grow to 10-12 feet. The alligator, a native of the southeastern U.S., was found in Bubbly Creek in a woody area near 37th Street and Racine Avenue, which at one time was one of the dirtiest parts of the river.

After years of cleanup efforts, the creek now has a bountiful fish population, which the alligator likely fed on, officials said. Its diet includes rats, birds and fish.

The alligator will be sent to a sanctuary in the Southeast, according to the herpetological society. The group was called to assist because city

Animal Care and Control is not equipped to handle alligators.

This is the first alligator found in the Chicago River, according to the herpetological society. The group's volunteers said they've confiscated 25 alligators this year, both in nature and in homes.

The Bridgeport alligator likely was dropped into the river relatively recently because it's unlikely it could have survived the severe winter, said Joyce Peterson, senior keeper in the swamp department at the Brookfield Zoo.

Tribune reporter Tim DeChant contributed to this report.

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