

CASE SUMMARY

FATAL ALLIGATOR ATTACK

FWNE16OFF7368

SYNOPSIS

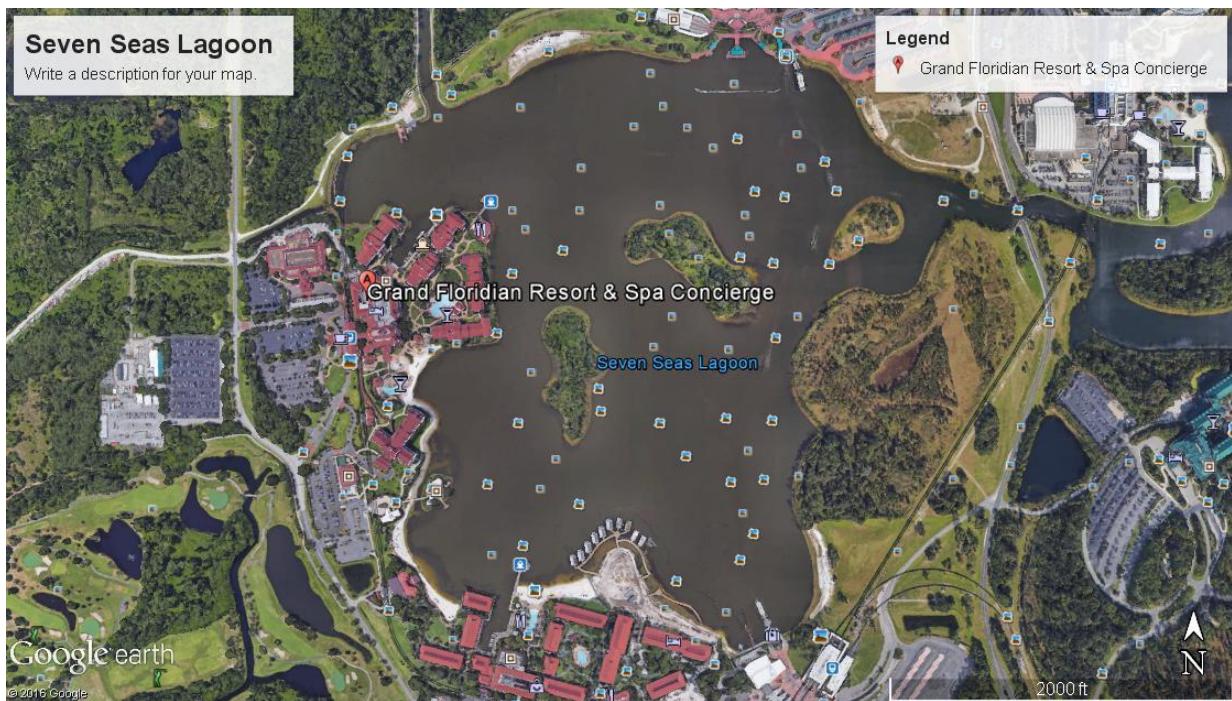
On June 14, 2016, at approximately 2100 hours, children were playing near the water's edge at Disney's Grand Floridian Resort. A witness, Matt Graves, heard a splash and saw an alligator bite his son's head and pull him into the water. Mr. Graves was close enough to grab the alligator, putting his hands into the animal's mouth. The alligator began to struggle and broke free from Mr. Graves, injuring his hands. The alligator disappeared into the water with the child. Multiple individuals called 911 for assistance. Fire Rescue personnel and law enforcement officers from Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) and Orange County Sheriff's Office began a search of the area by land, air and water. The body of the missing child was located underwater by a patrol officer involved in the search and recovered by the Orange County Sheriff's Office dive team in the Seven Seas Lagoon on the afternoon of June 15, 2016, submerged in approximately seven feet of water near where the initial attack had taken place. Six alligators were subsequently captured from the vicinity, euthanized, and had necropsies performed. Examination of the bite pattern on the victim's body and an autopsy confirmed that the cause of death was injuries sustained from a severe alligator bite.

INVESTIGATION

Site assessment

The attack location was in the Seven Seas Lagoon at the Grand Floridian Resort in Orange County, Florida. The lagoon is a large man-made impoundment used largely for waterborne transportation around the Walt Disney World (WDW) Complex. The shore is developed with hotels and transportation hubs, with stretches of more natural habitat in between buildings. Open water depth is

reported to be approximately 20 feet. Areas observed near shore appear to drop off sharply, with no shallow water flats. The lagoon is not unsuitable habitat for alligators, but it would not be considered a preferred location due to the deep clear water, lack of cover, insufficient areas to bask, limited sources of sustenance and high levels of human activity. “No swimming” signs were observed at the resort beach area.



Overview of Seven Seas Lagoon



Lagoon beach (attack location)

Victim/Fatality

The victim (a small child) was identified as Lane Thomas Graves, a white male, date of birth, 09/03/2013. Upon recovering Lane Graves, wounds were observed to the neck, head and face. The wounds were deep lacerations, contusions, abrasions and punctures. These wounds appeared consistent with an alligator bite. The victim was transported to the Medical Examiner's Office. The Medical Examiner's findings are as follows:

Cause of Death: "Cranio-cervical trauma and drowning"

Manner of Death: "Accident"

The detailed Medical Examiner's report will be in the attachments section of this report.

Interviews/Witness Statements

On June 15, 2016, a recorded statement was taken from Matt and Melissa Graves, the parents of the victim. The interview was conducted by Orange County Homicide Investigator Scott Bruinsma. The following information was learned from Matt and Melissa Graves:

- They came out (of the hotel) at about 8:15 p.m. or 8:30 p.m. to watch the movie “Zootopia” on the beach.
- The kids were going to the water with buckets to get water.
- Lane (Graves) bent down.
- Matt Graves saw a splash, thought it was a fish or something.
- Matt Graves looked over at Lane, who was bent over and “it bit his head.”
- Lane was ankle deep or less in the water.
- Matt Graves stated “I saw it come out to get him,” and “It grabbed him and pulled him back in the water.”
- Matt Graves jumped in the water to grab it (the alligator) and grabbed the teeth and “it just took off.”
- Matt Graves did not see any other alligators, “just the one.”
- Matt Graves stated that the alligator “wasn’t huge” and estimated the animal to be 5-6 feet, however, he could not see it all.
- Lane Graves is 37” tall and 30 pounds.
- Other children were at the water’s edge, but not when it happened.
- The children were making sand castles with the water.
- Matt Graves could not tell where the alligator went after the attack.
- Matt Graves tried to open the mouth (of the alligator) when he jumped into the water.
- Matt Graves is not aware of how his leg was injured, he does not know if there was another alligator.

This concluded the interview of Matt and Melissa Graves.

On June 14, 2016, a sworn written statement was taken from Christopher R. Tubbs, a Disney employee. The following information was learned from Christopher R. Tubbs:

Mr. Tubbs heard screaming from the beach. He had contact with the parents of the victim (telling them to exit the water). He called for assistance from the WDW Coordinator. He saw an alligator after the attack, approximately 15-25 feet offshore from the beach. He believes that he saw the victim being taken further out by the alligator, then says they both submerged. He stated that the alligator popped up again 150-200 yards out.

On June 14, 2016, a sworn written statement was taken from Leonard D. Jessee, a tourist from Virginia staying at the resort. The following information was learned from Jessee:

Mr. Jessee heard screaming and went to help. He heard a lifeguard yelling “get out of the water!” He witnessed the victim’s parents look for the missing child. He watched the parents’ other child while they searched.

On June 14, 2016, a sworn written statement was taken from Shawna Giacomini, a tourist from North Carolina staying at the resort. The following information was learned from Giacomini:

Miss Giacomini was on the beach at approximately 2015 hours with her two daughters, ages 15 and 9. The daughters saw an alligator about 5 feet from shore, near the marsh. The eldest daughter told the WDW AV/Movie Coordinator about the alligator. The person she told ran to a man whose shirt said “Coordinator” and told him about the alligator. The Giacomini’s went to the store and when they returned, the attack had already occurred.

On June 15, 2016, a verbal statement was taken from Peter E. Courakos (juvenile), a tourist from Bay Lakes, Florida, staying with his family at the resort. The following information was learned from Courakos:

Mr. Courakos was with his younger siblings walking down to the beach when he heard screaming and saw the victim being taken away by an alligator. He saw the child's father jump on the alligator and start punching it, but the alligator got away from him. He saw a lifeguard calling for help and the parents searching for the child. He took his siblings back to their room.

On June 14, 2016, a sworn written statement was taken from Kerry Koeberl, a tourist from Illinois staying at the resort. The following information was learned from Koeberl:

Mr. Koeberl was on the beach talking with the parents of the victim. The father ran to the water and Koeberl saw the alligator had the boy by the head. The father pulled the boy's feet but the alligator "whipped him further out into the water."

On June 19, 2016, an emailed statement was received from Jason Ochs, a tourist that was staying at the resort on the night of the incident. The following information was learned from Ochs:

Mr. Ochs had observed an alligator from his hotel balcony at approximately 1930 hours. The animal was swimming from the island southeast of the hotel, toward the beach area.

On June 15, 2016, an emailed statement was received from Alfred Smith, a tourist from South Carolina that was staying at the resort on the night of the incident. The following information was learned from Smith:

Mr. Smith observed and photographed an alligator from his hotel porch at 1941 hours. He pointed the animal out to an unknown WDW employee who saw the

alligator. Just before the attack, he saw the kids in the water ankle deep and was going out the door to warn them when he heard the mother screaming.

Based on information accrued during this investigation, a separate investigation (FWNE16OFF9711) is being conducted into incidents of alligator feeding near the attack location. Media reports indicated that there may have been animal feeding activity in the area near the incident location. Additionally, one anonymous source indicated a separate feeding incident may have occurred at another location on Disney property. Preliminary investigation into these incidents indicate that no correlation can be made to this attack and the cases will be further investigated separately. At the time of this writing, the investigation into alligator feeding activity is ongoing.

Identity of subject animal

Based on information and evidence gathered to date, and the collaborative efforts of FWC Investigations, FWC alligator subject matter experts, other agency crocodilian experts and a forensic odontologist, the following conclusions relating to the identity of the subject animal have been made:

- A size estimate was initially determined from a witness' estimate of the distance from the alligator's snout to eye indicating that the alligator was approximately 7-8 feet in length.
- An alligator of 7-8 feet is capable of taking prey the size of the victim and in the manner described by witnesses.
- FWC Nuisance Alligator Trappers captured three alligators in the size range believed to fit the subject animal.

- Two of the animals captured were in a close proximity to the incident location (approximately two-tenths of a mile).
- Alligators exhibit high site fidelity with regards to home range and would be expected to hunt and carry out other essential biological behaviors within their typical home range area.
- Due to previous investigations and observations of alligator behavior, one would expect to find the offending alligator close by after it has lost a food source.
- The two suspect animals had empty stomachs, and in conjunction with the warm summer temperatures, indicating their drive for food would be strong.
- Most bites to humans are inflicted by male alligators over nine feet. However, the two suspect animals, both females, were capable due to the size of the victim and his profile appearing even smaller as he bent down over the water. The victim could have been mistaken for some of the animal's normal prey like opossum, armadillo or raccoon.
- The area close to the incident location is marginal alligator habitat not likely to support a large population of adult alligators.
- Despite 24-hour a day trapping and hunting for multiple days following the incident, no other alligators capable of inflicting the fatal bite were located.
- After recovery of the victim, a bite comparison and analysis was conducted. The result was inconclusive as to the specific alligator responsible due to the lack of distinct patterns of the wounds. It was concluded that either of the two suspect female alligators could have been capable of inflicting the observed wounds.
- DNA swabs from the victim and all alligators captured were sent to a laboratory for analysis. The result from the victim's wounds were negative for animal DNA, no comparison could be made.

While we cannot say with absolute certainty that the subject animal has been taken, we are confident that the evidence gathered shows it is very likely that one of the two females captured close to the attack location was the offending animal.

INCIDENT ANALYSIS

Pre-incident

On June 14, 2016, the Graves family was on the beach at the Disney Grand Floridian Resort for movie time. Two-year-old Lane Graves was building sand castles. He was using a bucket to get water from the Seven Seas Lagoon and pouring it on the sand. Matt Graves was with him a few feet away. Lane was in the water not more than ankle deep. Lane bent down with the bucket to retrieve water.

Incident

An alligator seized Lane by the head and neck, one tooth puncturing the top of his skull, and one puncturing the center of the neck. The alligator began dragging Lane into deeper water.

Post-incident

Matt Graves saw the alligator had Lane and went into the water. He put his hands into the alligator's mouth and tried to pull it open. The alligator thrashed and broke Matt's grasp and went under the water. The alligator released Lane, who remained submerged near the attack location.

First responders arrived and began a search for Graves. The search encompassed the entire Seven Seas Lagoon and areas of water nearby. Elements of the search included land teams, aircraft and vessels on the water.

History

Orange County, Florida ranks 5th out of the 67 counties in Florida in number of unprovoked alligator bites since statistics have been recorded (66 years). This represents the first fatal alligator bite incident documented in Orange County, Florida.

Unprovoked bite data

County	Total Bites
Alachua	7
Baker	2
Bradford	2
Brevard	14
Broward	10
Charlotte	17
Citrus	5
Collier	17
Columbia	3
Dade	5
De Soto	1
Dixie	1
Duval	5
Flagler	3
Glades	1
Gulf	1
Hamilton	1
Hardee	2
Hendry	3
Hernando	2
Highlands	4
Hillsborough	13
Indian River	1
Jackson	2
Jefferson	1
Lafayette	1
Lake	13

Lee	34
Leon	1
Liberty	1
Manatee	6
Marion	14
Martin	4
Monroe	2
Okeechobee	6
Orange	17
Osceola	10
Palm Beach	25
Pasco	12
Pinellas	17
Polk	26
Putnam	3
Sarasota	19
Seminole	5
St. Johns	3
St. Lucie	7
Sumter	6
Taylor	3
Union	1
Volusia	10
Wakulla	4

Conclusion

Based on information and evidence gathered to date, the following conclusions have been made. The cause of this incident is a large apex predator considering a human as a food source.

The alligator:

- Was large enough to take human sized prey, particularly the size of a small child;
- Killed the victim with a crushing bite and drowning;
- Lived in a high human use area and may have had a diminished fear of people;
- Pulled the victim from the very shallow water's edge into deeper water;

The victim:

- Was near the water's edge at dusk, when alligators are most active during warm periods of the year.
- Was small in stature (37 inches tall and approximately 30 pounds).
- Was bent down at the time of the attack and would appear even smaller to an animal at water level.

I collaborated with FWC alligator subject matter expert Jason Waller to determine how to classify this attack. We classify this as a predatory attack with a high degree of certainty due to the totality of the circumstances. We find that the behaviors of the animal at the time of the attack are indicative of predatory intent. There is nothing to suggest provocation on the part of the victim or defensive action by the animal such as a bite and release. Alligators routinely hunt and kill prey along the shore and drag it into the water. The victim's small size and position (bent down) at the time of the attack would appear to the alligator similar to many of its normal food sources. Statistics show that humans are very rarely the victims of predatory bites; however, nothing precludes them from being viewed as such to an alligator of this size in comparison to a small person.

End of report