

A woman in camouflage gear is kneeling outdoors, holding the tail of a large crocodile. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. In the foreground, the head of the crocodile is open, showing its teeth and tongue. The background is a bright, open landscape.

Shelah: The Woman I Am

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Shelah - *A girl or woman. This word first appeared in Australian English in 1832 with the spelling shelah. It was initially used in Australia to refer to a woman of Irish origin, but from the late 19th century onwards it became a general term for a woman or girl.*

I'll never forget the first time I saw the movie *Crocodile Dundee*. I was six years old and absolutely transfixed by the huge crocs, the strong-willed blond reporter and the rugged competence of the one and only Mick Dundee. Side note on that – am I the only one that employs their best Australian accent imitation while brandishing a knife in their kitchen and drawls those timeless words – “That’s not a knife; THIS is a knife.” It still makes me giggle. Back to crocs...

I have a special place in my heart for predators. Perhaps it was the fact that my first big hunt was a Coastal brown bear. There’s something magical about hunting something that is perfectly equipped to hunt you back. Whatever the reason, an alligator hunt has been on my heart now for a while, but it didn’t seem like it was going to happen anytime soon. Then, opportunity struck.

A door opened in the form of an Osceola turkey and alligator hunt down in Florida. Stories galore! But, there was something else. There was this giddy excitement that two childhood dreams were coming together in one magnificent package! I was going to not only have an opportunity to chase some awesome stories, I was going to go hunt giant lizards, as well!

So, I prepped. I shot coins at 100 yards and generated DOPE on shorter ranges. I analyzed gator anatomy and studied shot placement. I packed carefully and researched taxidermy options. My main goal? To come away with a gator from which I could make a jacket, belt and boots. Additionally, I wanted to pull the teeth and make a hat band, just like that childhood idol, *Crocodile Dundee*.

Early on in the trip I harvested a beautiful Osceola turkey at Quail Creek Plantation. Check out the story “Collector of Experiences” for that adventure! The gator hunt was scheduled for the last couple of days in Florida.

I rolled into the lodge at Lightsey’s Family Ranch (check out the feature in this issue!) and was promptly greeted by a tanned, smiling face. He extended a work-roughened hand that looked far older than the rest of him. I estimated him to be in his early 30s.

Wearing jeans and a Palmetto leaf camo shirt, Costas on croakies and a camo baseball cap, he looked the part of a central Florida gator guide. I’m going to go down a bit of a two track here.

A guide can absolutely make or break a hunt from both an enjoyment and experience standpoint. Here are a few of the things I’ve learned to look for when evaluating a guide:

Competence and confidence are more enjoyable than arrogance.

Caution and intentionality are more beneficial than volatility and recklessness.

Personality. This is huge. Can they carry on a conversation? I am NOT a sit quietly for hours on end type person. I need dialogue.

The biggest one for me is safety. Do I believe this person can/will look out for me? Or, will they deliberately or carelessly put me in harm’s way?

Coming back to today... The warm mid-morning Florida sun hit the hood of his one ton black diesel Dodge. His name was Blake. “Grab your gun and let’s go find you a gator,” he drawled with a dimpled smile.

Any nerves I had flew out the window as I pulled Eleanor out of her Pelican case, grabbed my camera pack and climbed in. Thank goodness for running boards... Otherwise “levitate” would have been a more accurate term.

We headed to a location about 30 minutes away where there some good sized gators terrorizing a farmers’ livestock. We got out and spent the next couple of hours stalking, glassing, watching and listening. We also talked. A lot.

When I hunt, I have lots of questions. I’m not looking for a cut and dried (or silent) experience. I want to know why we are doing what we’re doing and discuss it at length.

“Why do you have a fishing pole?”

“How do we know how big they are?”

“What environmental markers am I looking for to indicate good habitat?”

“What’s their most acute sense?”

“Are there snakes?”

“Did you bring snacks?”



This last one is super important...

A couple of hours, oodles of questions and a purple Gatorade later, we headed to another location. I kind of giggled at the beverage choice as Blake pulled it out of the cooler in the bed of the truck. Get it, “*Gator*” ade?

At the new location, I popped in my electronic ears and turned them up. I quietly and carefully followed behind Blake as we traversed the land, stopping frequently to glass. The amplified sound made me wince as a stick snapped beneath my snake boot.

Suddenly we stopped. I watched, holding my breath, as we crested a hill and saw a huge gator right near the shoreline. We dropped to the ground and watched the lizard beached in the shade beneath a tree. Harvest goal forgotten, I took a moment to just absorb the experience.

I was so close I could see the scales, moss and ridges. The tail was a powerful scalloped monstrosity that curled lazily behind him and floated in the shallow mud. It was a moment in time I’ll never forget. The respect for both the animal and its capabilities increased immediately when the seemingly slumbering reptile opened an eye, glared at us and disappeared beneath the surface in a flurry of bubbles.

More excited than ever, we put in two more stalks resulting in unsuccessful encounters. We crawled up another hill and saw a beautiful, brown head swimming through the water about 40 yards away. His coloration was distinctly different from any others we had seen.

“Do you like him?” Blake whispered. “He’s at least nine feet.”

I nodded. Immediately, my heart rate kicked up and my hands started to shake. It’s amazing to me how one minute a hunt can feel like a glorified nature hike and the next it’s an adrenaline infused and sweat soaked stalk. It can happen in the blink of an eye...

Drawing up to my knees, I braced back on my heels and settled the forend of my rifle in the saddle of the tripod. I snuggled into the gun and found my quarry in the scope. I was arguably way over scoped for a 40-yard target with a 3.5-18 x 50, but it was going to have to work. Side note – practice A LOT at the ranges you think you’ll be harvesting because your parallax may not get you the results you’re used to practicing with at longer distances.

Now comes the interesting part. I had practiced and studied for rear target presentations. It had never occurred to me I



would be faced with a profile shot. But, that was exactly what I had. A moving, 40-yard profile shot with a quarter-sized kill spot.

I drew three deep breaths, bottomed-out my heart rate and squeezed. I stayed in the gun and cycled another round in. Blake’s words echoed in my head – “If you put a lethal shot on him, you’ll see a belly and his back foot waving goodbye.” Through the scope, I saw one reptilian foot waving goodbye connected to a white, scaly belly. Yesssss!

I clicked the safety back on, slinged up and followed Blake to shore. He was already there casting his fishing pole out to drag him back to shore. I walked down the bank to stand beside him as my gator floated back to us.

As we dragged him up on the sand, I went

down on my knees to learn about him. His head was huge and his mouth indicated both battles won and teeth lost. The skin was cool to the touch and flawlessly textured. God’s handiwork was both beautiful and functional when it came to gator design.

Blake waited quietly while I captured the images I wanted and then helped me drag him up the bank. He proved to be just as competent behind a camera as he was in the field, which was a huge blessing. He captured some incredible images I will be able to cherish for a lifetime.

It took me over a month to sit down and put into words what I want you to understand about this hunt. It was so many complicated things, yet my excitement was so simply founded. I was a woman living a dream sacredly held since

childhood. From the moment I watched Mick Dundee and Sue, the “Sheila,” traipse through the Australian outback, I craved both living and documenting adventure.

So last month, I went to Florida and lived a dream of a Shelah – a woman or girl. This is the original term used before being translated to “Sheila,” meaning woman. Shelah seemed more fitting as this journey started as a girl and is being lived as a woman. That woman is me.

Check back for pictures of the boots, jacket, belt and hat band! ■

#myladyshooterslifestyle

GEAR LIST

MAKE:	GRIFFIN & HOWE
MODEL:	HIGHLANDER
CALIBER:	6.5 CREEDMOOR
DETAILS:	
	PROOF RESEARCH BARREL
	DEFIANCE MACHINE ACTION
	TRIGGER TECH TRIGGER
	SWAROVSKI OPTIC 3.5-18X50
AMMO:	
	HORNADY 143 GRAIN ELDX

