

# Creatures of the Night

*There is always adventure to be found in the Lowcountry. The wonders that surround us are exposed on a nature series called Coastal Kingdom. This program is made possible by Tony Mills, an adventurous biologist for the LowCountry Institute and sponsored by the Beaufort County Channel. It is easy to take for granted this unique area that we call home. Step into the WILD...enjoy this story of exploration and visit [BlufftonBreeze.com](http://BlufftonBreeze.com) for links to the show.*

*Amber Hester Kuehn: Environmental Editor*



By Tony Mills

As we drove down the road, the dirt lane was only partially illuminated creating a ghostly view from the cab of the truck. I was a bit mesmerized by the scene and slammed on my brakes just in time to avoid hitting a huge alligator crossing the road ahead of us. This was a big animal, probably nine or ten feet long and weighing a couple hundred pounds. I grabbed my flashlight, leaped out of the vehicle and raced over to the edge hoping to get a better look at this impressive crocodilian. Observing nothing, I went to the opposite side to see where the large reptile came from. I stepped into the water and slowly lifted the beam of my flashlight out in front of me. The freshwater swamp lit up like a Christmas tree with a hundred spots of orange light. It took me a moment to realize what I was actually seeing...the eyes of American alligators, maybe fifty of them floating in the wetland with just their heads above the water and their orange eyes gleaming at me.

Not all shoots for Coastal Kingdom (our television

program about Lowcountry animals and their habitats) go exactly as planned. It was 10 o'clock in the evening and still close to 90 degrees. I was accompanied by Rob Lewis videographer and editor of the show and my wife and fellow naturalist Kathryn. The site we had chosen was a wildlife management area in the Lowcountry





the shallow water, set up the tripod and shined their lights at the water. The sight was even more spectacular with the extra illumination.

Alligator eyes have a layer of cells in the back of each eye called the tapetum lucidum. These retinal structures reflect light back through the eye allowing the alligator better vision in the dark and creating a vivid reflection we were seeing as orange shines. Although many animals possess tapetum membranes, the reflective properties are especially pronounced in alligators. An individual alligator can be seen from several hundred yards away in complete darkness by shining flashlight toward it and looking down the beam.

We tried a few segments but Rob was not happy with the footage...we needed more light to capture what we were seeing with our eyes. When you shoot in remote locations like this, you often have to improvise to get the best shots. Rob had me drive the truck down the bank and aim the headlights at the alligators. The result was absolutely astounding as even more eye shines became visible. Rob repositioned his camera adjacent to the beam and I backed into the thigh-deep wetland. I have to admit, as I talked on camera, I peered over my shoulder more than once to see if any gators had crept up behind me. We got the great shots we needed for the segment, hopped in the truck and drove back home recounting our amazing adventures with the Lowcountry's most impressive reptile.

South Carolina. The plan was to photograph owls and other nocturnal animals for an episode called "Creatures of the Night". After a long night of swatting mosquitoes and sweating profusely, we did manage to get some decent owl footage, but when we saw that alligator across the road, I knew we'd stumbled onto something special.

I turned around and was delighted to find no eye shines in the canal behind me. I surmised that the alligators in front of me were waiting to cross the road to get to the saltmarsh on the other side. The only problem was...I was directly in their path! Although alligators prefer freshwater, they commonly go into saline creeks and marshes to feed on blue crabs, mullet and other seafood. They must periodically return to freshwater to purge the saltwater out of their bodies. I felt a little vulnerable being so close to so many full-size alligators, but I also knew that this was a great opportunity for the show. Rob and Kathryn grabbed the equipment and came over to take a look. They slipped into

"Creatures of the Night" and other Coastal Kingdom episodes can be seen on Friday evenings at 7:30 on SCETV and every Wednesday evening on the County Channel. All episodes and a variety of short animal clips are available on the website at [www.coastalkingdom.com](http://www.coastalkingdom.com)

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