

PHYSICS

100 Lb. Electronic Brain to Control Automatic Factory

➤ A "baby brain," an all-electronic computer that is very small and compact, has been revealed by the Jacobs Instrument Company of Bethesda, Md.

About the size of a table model television set, it weighs around 100 pounds, solves problems fed to it with 300 tiny tubes no larger than those used in hearing aids. It can add and also multiply at a very fast clip, getting the answer for addition of two 24-digit numbers in eight millionths of a second.

Its main value, the inventor, Donald H. Jacobs, claims will be in the automatic factory. There it can continuously work out problems involving such things as temperatures, pressures and quantities of materials, then adjust valves, motor controls, etc., to the settings necessary for maximum production of the desired item, he states. The machine could even be set up to order new materials when needed.

Another projected use for such an instrument, Mr. Jacobs says, is as a small and relatively inexpensive computing machine, simple to operate, for general office use. Once the machine is set up to handle a given type of problem, it would be quite easy for anyone to feed the problem into, and get the right answer from, the machine.

Science News Letter, October 20, 1951

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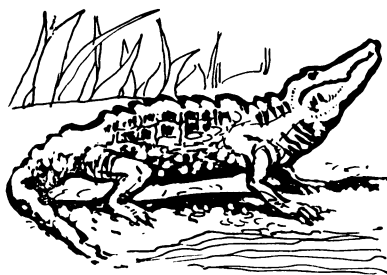
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Alligators

➤ WHAT BETWEEN handbags and shoes and shooting just for fun, the native supply of these interesting reptiles is rapidly diminishing, and only in the Everglades and in some of the wilder regions of the Gulf Coast can one any longer find the 12-foot "granddaddy 'gators" once boasted by every southern river. Six-footers are still fairly common, however, and four-foot adolescents are thick as sparrows.

But no one need dread to go about on river sides in the South for fear of being knocked into the water and devoured by an alligator. Authentic cases of attack on human beings by these creatures, formidably jawed and toothed though they are, are even more rare than attested instances of man-eating sharks in American waters.

Alligators are for the most part content with smaller game; incautious fish, turtles, ducks that mistake their still forms for floating logs, and foolish pigs that venture out into shallows.

But alligators are not merely animate inventions of the powers of darkness and evil, designed for the discomfiture of the seeker for climatic paradises. They have their useful work to do. In addition to being scavengers wherever they happen to live, in the flood-menacing and levee-guarded rivers of the South, they are policemen as well.

Bank-burrowing aquatic animals, especially muskrats, constantly endanger the protecting embankments with their mining, and alligators as constantly keep their numbers down. For this reason, the people of Mississippi, Louisiana and other southern states desire the protection of the alligator; and the old custom of taking potshots at the floating reptiles from the decks of passing boats is being discouraged.

Whether you see "tame" alligators at an alligator farm, or with luck, a real out-of-door 'gator in a pond or river, they may give you a mild case of the "creeps," for they seem to belong to an earlier and crueller age of the earth. You sometimes hear the remark, "descendants of the dinosaur."

Alligators are not descended from the dinosaurs, though they are cousins to them. The dinosaur line died out completely, leaving the honor of being the largest reptiles to the crocodiles and alligators, which were the lesser people of the swamps of Tertiary time.

Alligators are pretty strictly an American institution. They are distinguished from their Old-World relatives the crocodiles, by a number of features. But crocodiles are not strictly Old-World beasts. There are crocs in South America and even the tip of Florida occasionally yields up an authentic crocodile.

A Southern delicacy that not many people have the chance to try is 'gator-tail steak. Running down the length of the tail, around the spinal column, is a thick cylindrical column of muscle. When an alligator is killed for his leather, the hunters frequently cut out a section of this, slice it into suitable thicknesses, and broil it over a swampwood fire—first-class eating, so it is reported.

Science News Letter, October 20, 1951

RADIO

Short Wave Radio Forecasts Made Specially for Pacific

➤ A SECOND forecasting center has now been set up for "radio hams" and others using short wave radio frequencies. From Elmendorf Air Base, Anchorage, Alaska, twice each week will come forecasts as to whether during the next 25 days short wave broadcasts crossing the North Pacific will get through clearly, or be disturbed by weak signals and fading, and possibly blackouts.

Radio forecasts tailored to meet North Atlantic conditions have been made by the National Bureau of Standards from its Washington headquarters for about a decade, and on Oct. 2 its North Pacific Radio Warning Service became available. Advance forecasts can now be obtained by mail from the forecasting center. Later in the year the Bureau expects to begin making North Pacific forecasts daily or even more often.

Science News Letter, October 20, 1951

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