

Loggerheads

We had just finished our seafood dinners at Ray's Mill Pond Café when Mary Helen exclaimed, "They're about to feed the 'gators!" I rushed to pay the bill and caught up with the small group following Harvey and Barb across the wooden deck and out on the pier just a few inches above the calm tea-brown water at the rear of the restaurant. We passed several red and white signs: "Do not feed the animals!"

I assumed Barb and Harvey were affiliated with the Café and were authorized to feed the alligators. Perhaps this was a Thursday evening routine meant to provide customers with more than just a tasty meal of fried catfish, red snapper, shrimp, and flounder served with two kinds of pickles, bowls of slaw and grits with cheese or butter, and hush puppies.

Barb and Harvey had napkins full of hush puppies, which they called corn dodgers. When other diners departed, Harvey and Barb collected the uneaten corn dodgers from their plates before the staff could buss the tables.

"See that little feller there?" Barb said as she pointed to a clump of lily pads where two eyes, a snout, and ridges of the back and tail poked just above the water. "I'd say he's about three feet long," she announced confidently to her small audience.

"They's a bigger one over here," interrupted Harvey, who had strolled to the end of the pier where a young couple wrapped in each other's arms seemed mildly annoyed by this intrusion of their romantic sunset solitude. "Bout six foot, I reckon. But he ain't the biggest in this pond. They's a thirteen-footer that shows up here sometimes." The couple responded politely with an unenthusiastic "Wow." They clearly did not want to encourage this man who seemed so eager to share his expertise.

Plop! Barb tossed a dodger into the water within a foot or so of the snout of the smaller gator. "There you go," she encouraged. I anticipated a quick vicious snap of those toothy jaws around the floating dodger but the beast had no sense of urgency. We witnessed a subtle bending of the tail, a slow

meander to the floating morsel and an unhurried tilting of the head as the dodger slipped gently into the jaws. “Good boy,” she said, as if she’d just given her dog a treat. The crowd murmured with approval. Barb tossed another dodger which landed nearby on lily pad. Little feller approached and calmly consumed this one. This wasn’t his first time eating a corn dodger off a lily platter.

Barb joined Harvey at the far end of the pier and began tossing dodgers toward the six-footer who lurked further away. Clearly, she had plenty of experience tossing dodgers to gators, but her aim was not perfect which meant the gator had to expend a little effort to swim over to where the dodgers floated. “Don’t worry. He knows where it is. He’ll get it. He’s a gator. He’s in no hurry,” she narrated.

One dodger bobbed on the surface. I watched a big turtle approach from underneath and take a bite.

Harvey saw this bobble, too. “Turtle’s ‘bout to get it,” Harvey remarked. “Loggerhead. He’s not even a big one. I was fishing from my boat here once. Big loggerhead took my bait. I reeled it in, grabbed my pliers, and got my hook back before I let him go.”

Harvey continued with another tale, but I wasn’t listening carefully. I had a good look at that turtle. Even though the water was dark with tannins I saw the distinctive shape of the head, snout and shell. I’m certain it was a snapping turtle. I was a professor of biology for 35 years. I know a snapping turtle when I see one.

Loggerheads are sea turtles, marine reptiles that spend their entire lives in saltwater oceans, bays, and estuaries. They most certainly don’t live in a freshwater pond seventy miles from the coast. Harvey is wrong.

I took a closer look at Harvey. He might be in his seventies. His jowls are plump. His nose bulges. He squints through thick eyelids. His hands are large and rough. As we are in rural southern Georgia, it is likely that Harvey

Loggerheads

has been a lifelong farmer of peanuts or corn or blueberries or sorghum or cotton. Maybe all of those.

Short tufts of gray hair swirl from Harvey's grimy hat with large letters proudly proclaiming, "I Voted for a Convicted Felon."

His hat told me it would probably be futile to try to convince him that loggerhead turtles do not live in this pond. I remained silent.

I'm probably wrong about some things I think I know about farming. Would Harvey gently correct my mistake, or would he let it go unchallenged?

Barb tossed the last of the dodgers from her napkin. "People didn't leave many dodgers on their plates tonight, so that's all we have," she said, apologizing simultaneously to her audience and the two gators. The show is over.

We followed Barb and Harvey to the parking lot past the red and white warning signs they had ignored. Should I expect someone who boasts of voting for a convicted felon to pay heed to those instructions?

The young couple remained at the end of the pier, happy to be left alone to embrace, to move slowly like the gators and turtles that swirl beneath them in the mysterious water. They, like reptiles, must come up for air every now and then.

Loggerhead or snapping turtle. Felony or misdemeanor. They don't care.

GR Davis

23 May 2026