

The Teeth Of The Matter

by Horace Loftin

THE fine set of teeth of the alligator performs its function wonderfully well. They are sharp, stout peg-like just right for grabbing and holding on to the prey until it is ready to be gulped down, whole or in pieces. But as in all the vertebrate animals with teeth, up to the mammals, its teeth are essentially all alike.

The mammals, on the other hand, are characterized by having teeth of several kinds in each individual. For example, man has incisors in front for biting, rather degenerate canines for stabbing and holding, and premolars and molars for chewing and grinding. There are exceptions to this generality, of course, but they are so few that they prove the rule.

Each mammalian group or species has, as a rule again, its own particular kind of dentition, its incisors, canines, premo-

lars and molars being so modified (or lacking) as to fit its particular feeding habits. Man is an omnivorous (all-eating) animal, and his teeth reflect this by being quite generalized — no one kind of tooth outstrips the other in size or importance. Another familiar mammal with "similar" omnivorous habits carries a set of teeth remarkably like our own — the hog!

THE RODENTS are gnawing animals; and as might be expected, the front incisors are extremely well-developed and specialized. Canines, which would be virtually useless to rodents, are completely absent. Premolars and molars are present for grinding. The incisors of rodents grow continuously throughout life, being worn down (and kept sharp) by the opposing incisors on the opposite jaw as well as by hard usage.