

American Alligator

Alligator mississippiensis

Two dark eyes and a leathery back skim the water at the edge of a murky swamp. Like a large black lizard, the alligator scans the bank in search of food. Many different kinds of alligators existed in the prehistoric past, but only two remain. The American alligator inhabits the fresh waters of North Carolina's coast and other southeastern states, while the Chinese alligator lives in the Lower Yangtze River Valley in China.

These two reptiles share the order Crocodylia with their cousins the crocodiles. People sometimes mistake alligators for crocodiles, but in North America the two live together only in Florida's southernmost marshes. An alligator has a broader snout and only its upper teeth show when its mouth is closed, while both the upper and lower teeth show in crocodiles.

History and Status

American alligators were once a common sight in the lakes, swamps and rivers along the Gulf of Mexico, on the Coastal Plain and up the Mississippi River. But they became scarce as habitats declined and hunters sought them for food and sport and especially for hides. In 1967, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service protected this alligator by classifying it as an endangered species. Some populations prospered, enabling its classification to be changed to Threatened in Florida and other coastal regions such as North Carolina.

Description

Alligators resemble lizards but grow much larger and have thicker bodies and tails. Male alligators grow to about 11 or 12 feet long and weigh from 450 to 550 pounds. Females measure about 8 feet and weigh more than 160 pounds.

Adults range in color from black or dark gray to dark olive and may show faint yellowish crossbands. Young alligators appear black, with vibrant yellow bands that fade over time.

Alligators have a broad snout useful for digging, a short neck, short legs for walking and a thick tail that helps them swim when it is moved from side to side. Sharp, cone-shaped teeth aid the alligator in seizing its prey. And two turret-like eyes stick up above the skull so the alligator can see above the water as it swims.

Its leathery skin is toughest on its back, where small bones called osteoderms create a rough, ridged shield. Unlike in the turtle, though, these hard, flat bones are not connected to each other, so the alligator retains flexibility.

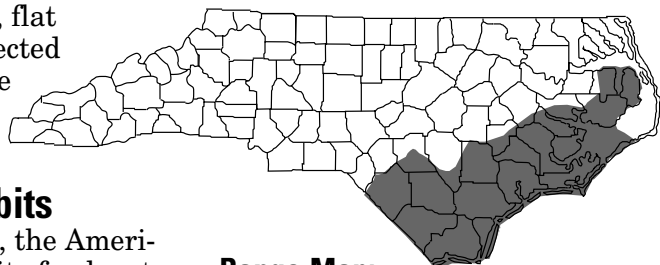
Habitat and Habits

In the Southeast, the American alligator inhabits freshwater swamps, marshes, abandoned

rice fields, ponds, lakes and the backwaters of large rivers.

Alligators are social animals and they congregate often, especially during the breeding season. Both males and females call and hiss. The male calls with a loud, throaty bellow and may hiss and inflate to impress a mate. Females bellow and grunt, too, but less loudly. Young call with a high-pitched, quack-like chirp.

Around June, female alligators begin building a mound-like nest of leaves, mud, sticks and other debris. The nest, built near water, measures about 2 to 3 feet tall and 5 to 6 feet in diameter. The females lay about 30 white eggs, slightly larger than hens' eggs, in a cavity on top of the mound. Then they cover the eggs with nesting material to incubate them. When hatched after nine weeks, baby alligators are about 9 inches long. The mother usually hears the babies calling inside the nest and removes the



Range Map:

Occupied range

**WILD
Facts**

top. She may help crack the eggs by rolling them around in her mouth.

The mother protects the nest and her young for up to two years, often defending them from predators such as raccoons, bears and people. In the water, the hatchlings feed on insects, crustaceans and other small animals, and they can become prey themselves for bullfrogs, turtles, snakes and wading birds.

Young alligators grow about 1 foot a year for the first six years. Then, the females' growth slows, but males continue to grow for many more years.

As the temperature drops, usually in January or February in North Carolina, alligators become inactive. They burrow in the mud, hide in a den in the bank or rest underwater. Alligators must continue breathing and will die if a lake freezes over. Researchers have seen them survive such a freeze when their snout protruded above the ice. On warmer days, alligators bask.

During droughts, gator holes left in winter often create a refuge for fish, frogs and other aquatic animals struggling to survive.

Range and Distribution

The American alligator ranges from coastal North Carolina to southern Florida and west to central Texas. They inhabit the swamps and shores of North Carolina from Brunswick and New Hanover counties north to the Alligator River Wildlife Refuge in Hyde County. The largest populations live in the southernmost counties, but healthy populations also live near the lakes of the Croatan National Forest in parts of Carteret, Craven and Jones counties.

People Interactions

Today, the alligators' Threatened status makes it illegal to kill them. Yet the smooth skin of an alligator's belly makes fine leather handbags, shoes and other acces-

Head Shape



Alligator



Crocodile

sories, and, though protected, this ancient reptile remains in danger because of poaching and habitat degradation.

Alligators rarely attack people. A female, though, is likely to charge and defend her nest, especially from spring to early autumn. They may bite. The muscles that close their jaws are very strong, but once shut, the jaws can be held closed with bare hands, and are sometimes captured this way.

References

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Credits

Written by Sarah Friday.
 Illustrated by J. T. Newman.
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AMERICAN ALLIGATOR

Classification

Class: Reptilia
 Order: Crocodylia

Average Size

Males: 11 to 12 ft., 450 to 550 lbs.
 Females: about 8 ft., more than 160 lbs.

Food

Young alligators eat insects and crustaceans. Adult alligators eat fish, snakes, frogs, turtles, mussels, crayfish, birds, muskrats, and many other kinds of small animals that live in or near the water. They feed primarily at dawn and dusk.

Breeding

Nesting begins in June. One brood a year. Female may not breed each year. Lays about 30 eggs.

Young

Hatchlings protected for up to two years by mother.

Life Expectancy

About 15 years in the wild.