

American Alligator

(*Alligator mississippiensis*)

Kingdom: *Animalia*

Phylum: *Chordata*

Class: *Sauropsida*

Order: *Crocodylia*

Family: *Alligatoridae*



DESCRIPTION

Alligators are characterized by a broader snout and eyes more dorsally located than their crocodile cousins. Both living species also tend to be darker in color, often nearly black but color is very dependent on the water. Algae-laden waters produce greener alligators; alligators from waters with a lot of tannic acid from overhanging trees are often darker (although the Chinese alligator has some light patterning.) Also, in alligators only the upper teeth can be seen with the jaws closed (in contrast to true crocodiles, in which upper and lower teeth can be seen), though many individuals bear jaw deformities which complicate this means of identification.

The eyes of a large alligator will glow red and those of a smaller one will glow green when a light is shined on them. This fact can be used to find alligators in the dark.

An average American alligator's weight and length is 800 lbs. and 13 feet long. According to the Everglades National Park website, the largest alligator ever recorded in Florida was 17 feet 5 inches long. The largest alligator ever recorded measured 19 feet 2 inches, and was found on Marsh Island, Louisiana. Few of the giant specimens were weighed, but the larger ones could have exceeded a ton in weight.

HABITAT

There are only two countries on earth that have alligators: the United States and China. The American Alligators live in the states along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida as well as Georgia and the Carolinas. The Chinese alligator is endangered and lives only in the Yangtze River valley though currently Rockefeller Wildlife refuge in southern Louisiana has several in captivity in an attempt to preserve the species. The American Alligator is found in the United States

from the Carolinas to Florida and along the Gulf Coast. The majority of American Alligators inhabit Florida and Louisiana. In Florida alone there are an estimated more than 1 million alligators. The United States is the only nation on earth where both alligators and crocodiles live side by side. American Alligators live in freshwater environments, such as ponds, marshes, wetlands, rivers, and swamps. In China, they live only along the fresh water of the Yangtze River system.

BEHAVIOR

Large male alligators are solitary, territorial animals. Smaller alligators can often be found in large numbers in close proximity to each other. The largest of the species (both males and females), will defend prime territory; smaller alligators have a higher tolerance of other alligators within a similar size class.

Although alligators have heavy bodies and slow metabolisms, they are capable of short bursts of speed that can exceed 30 miles per hour, though this could more properly be classified as a short fast lunge rather than a dash. Alligators' main prey are smaller animals that they can kill and eat with a single bite. Alligators may kill larger prey by grabbing it and dragging it in the water to drown. Alligators consume food that cannot be eaten in one bite by allowing it to rot or by biting and then spinning or convulsing wildly until bite-size pieces are torn off. This is referred to as the "death roll."

Most of the muscle in an alligator's jaw is intended for biting and gripping prey. The muscles for opening their jaws are relatively weak. As a result an adult man can hold an alligator's jaw shut with his bare hands. See alligator wrestling.

DIET

Alligators are opportunistic feeders, eating almost anything they can catch. When they are young they eat fish, insects, snails, and Crustaceans. As they grow they take progressively larger prey items, including: larger fish such as gar, turtles, various mammals, birds, and other reptiles. Their stomachs also often contain gastroliths. They will even consume carrion if they are sufficiently hungry. Adult alligators can take razorbacks and deer and are well known to kill and eat smaller alligators. In some cases, larger alligators have been known to hunt the Florida panther and bears, making it the apex predator throughout its distribution. As humans encroach onto their habitat,

attacks on humans are few but not unknown. Alligators, unlike the large crocodiles, do not immediately regard a human upon encounter as prey.

Unfortunately, human deaths caused by alligators have increased. While there were only 9 fatal attacks in the U.S.A. from the 1970 to 2000, 11 people were killed by alligators from 2001 to 2006. More deaths occurred in this 5-year period than did in the previous 30. For a long time people have been taught that alligators fear humans, which is true, but this has led some people to be foolhardy and enter the animal's habitat in ways that provoke aggression.

REPRODUCTION

The maturity of the alligator is dependent more upon the size of the animal than its age. An alligator is generally considered mature when it reaches a length of six feet or more. They are seasonal breeders. The mating season is in spring when the water warms. The female builds a nest of vegetation that rots, incubating the eggs. Sex is fully determined at the time of hatching and naturally irreversible thereafter, and depends on the temperature of egg incubation, temperatures 30 °C producing all females, 34 °C yielding all males. The temperature-sensitive period is between 7 and 21 days of incubation. Natural nests constructed on levees are hotter (34 °C) than those constructed on wet marsh (30 °C), thus the former hatch males and the latter females. The natural sex ratio at hatching is five females to 1 male. Females hatched from eggs incubated at 30 °C weigh significantly more than males hatched from eggs incubated at 34 °C. The mother will defend the nest from predators and will assist the babies to water once they hatch. She will provide protection to the young for about a year if they remain in the area.