

AMERICAN ALLIGATOR

Alligator mississippiensis



Location: The American alligator ranges from the coastal swamps of North and South Carolina southward to the southern tip of Florida, and westward along the Gulf Coast to the mouth of the Rio Grande. This reptile also occurs northward along the Mississippi River to the mouth of the Arkansas River. The alligator's habitat includes marshes and swamps.

Diet: American alligators are opportunistic carnivores and consume the prey that is most available in their habitat. Food items vary with the size of the reptile. Hatchlings rely on insects, snails and small fish; juvenile diets include crawfish, shrimp, crabs, larger fish, frogs, turtles, snakes, and a variety of obtainable small birds or mammals. Adult alligators consume large birds, large fish, muskrats, raccoons, otters and rabbits.

Most often, the alligator is seen partially submerged with only the head above water. This enables the reptile to breathe, see and hear while a small portion of the alligator is visible. A bird, mammal or fish that approaches too close to the alligator is quickly caught. The closing power of the jaw muscles, measuring over 3,000 pounds per square inch, help ensure a meal.

Life Cycle: Alligators are most active between dusk and dawn. They tend to live in loosely organized associations. Communication between alligators may be accomplished with the use of sound, which is particularly valuable in their amphibious environment since water is a better conductor of sound than air. American alligators produce a chorus of thunderous roars and bellows, but they are also capable of creating subaudible sounds. Subaudible sounds are generated when alligators gulp air into their throats and tense their muscles to the point that vibrations occur and the water above the chest suddenly dances, giving the appearance of an upside-down waterfall.

The breeding season occurs in the spring and early summer. Courting pairs may swim and sun in the same vicinity for several days before mating occurs. After breeding, the male leaves to mate with other females.

The female alligator normally builds a nest 2 months after the onset of courtship. The cone-shaped nest mounds are usually 5-7 feet at the base and stand roughly 3 feet high. Once the nest is constructed, the female digs a cavity in the top of the nest with her hind feet. She produces between 30-70 leathery eggs. As the female lays each leathery egg, she pushes it into the cavity with her hind foot and covers the egg cavity with vegetation.

The incubation for alligator eggs is usually just over 2 months, depending upon ambient temperatures. The damp, decaying plant material covering the nest helps to insulate and maintain a constant temperature. Interestingly, the sex of the babies is determined by the temperature inside the nest during the first 3 weeks of incubation.

Just before hatching, each neonate develops a small egg tooth at the end of the snout, which aids the offspring in breaking free from the egg. The young hatch at about the same time and begin to give grunting calls. The mother assists the youngsters and carries them to open water. The hatchlings usually measure 8-10 inches in length. They feed on their own but usually remain in the group with their mother for their first 3 years. The babies' grunts help the female keep track of the brood and if they are threatened, distress calls bring the mother hissing and lunging.

After their first winter, young alligators grow about a foot per year for the next 4-5 years. Under ideal conditions, youngsters may grow to 14-15 feet but adults of over 17 feet have been recorded. Male alligators may live longer than females. In the wild, males reach more than 35 years of age. In captivity, individuals can live about 50 years.

Remarks: Crocodiles differ from alligators in that they have long, triangle-shaped heads, and the top and bottom teeth can be seen on the outside of the mouth. Alligators have a flat, broad head and, when they close their mouths, only the top teeth are seen.