



# American Alligator

*Alligator mississippiensis*



## What are they?

The American alligator is a large reptile in the order Crocodylia (a group which also includes caimans, crocodiles, and gharials). All of these are among the largest living reptiles, and they are very well adapted for life in and around the water.

### *Size*

Adults typically reach lengths of about six to thirteen feet (with the record being a very unusual 19 feet). They begin life as eight or nine inch hatchlings.

### *Description*

They are somewhat lizard-shaped (but are only distantly related to lizards) with a long tail that is flattened vertically, like an oar. Adults are dark gray to nearly black with some traces of the lighter cream to yellowish cross bars that are the juvenile pattern. The long snout is rounded like the letter “U” and when the mouth is closed, the upper teeth overlap the lower ones (as opposed to a crocodile’s somewhat “V”-shaped snout with the fourth tooth of the lower jaw sticking up, exposed against the upper jaw). The American alligator rests with its belly against the ground but can walk upright on its four strong limbs and

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run for short distances. Their scales contain bony structures called osteoderms which give them something similar to a suit of studded armor. The scales along the back and down onto the tail are larger and thicker.

The pupils of an alligator's eyes are vertically shaped like a cat's, and the eye has a clear nictitating membrane that can close and protect the eye while underwater. The openings of the nostrils and the ears can close like valves. There is also a flap at the back of the mouth that closes, preventing water from getting into the airway when the 'gator is underwater. The alligator's middle ears are connected by a



The ear is a slit opening behind this alligator's eye. Notice the elliptical pupil and the teeth of the upper jaw overlapping the lower.

canal that makes sound localization more acute. Small pressure sensors in the skin around the snout and jaws allow alligators to detect movement in the water.

### Where are they found?

American alligators are found from North Carolina through the southeastern U.S. and East and South Texas into a little of northern Mexico.

They live in coastal marshes (including some brackish water), reservoirs, bayous, and swamps, and in Texas their inland range follows river systems such as the Trinity with quiet waters and muddy or sandy banks.

### How do they live?

#### *Daily and seasonal activity*

Alligators dig cave-like dens in the banks of waterways and use them for shelter in the cold months of winter. They often bask in morning or midday sunlight for warmth, but much of their activity happens as it gets dark and during the night.

#### *What they eat*

Alligators eat almost any small animal found in the water or at the water's edge, including fish, turtles, frogs, wading birds, nutria, and even small alligators. They may actively pursue prey, especially one that is moving around in the water. They also sometimes ambush prey by sitting and waiting for it to approach within reach.

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## *Reproduction*

In spring, male alligators may bellow loudly and tail-slap or head-slap in the water to attract females. After mating, females build a nest, a pile of decaying vegetation. She then lays about 20 to 60 hard-shelled white eggs. The mother stays nearby and defends the nest. Then, when babies hatch, she digs into the nest and carries them to the water. She may continue to watch over babies during their first year.

## *Enemies and defense*

Baby alligators can be prey for various animals, and when attacked they make high-pitched grunting or chirping noises that will generally bring mother to their defense. Babies and “adolescents” are sometimes preyed upon by other alligators. Adult alligators have almost no predators or enemies except humans.

An adult alligator may hiss as a warning, may charge toward the threat, and may bite. A dominant male alligator may bellow or tail-slap to chase other males away and if that does not work, they may physically attack each other.

## **Interaction with humans**

American alligators are generally not aggressive towards humans, with some exceptions. They may become accustomed to people who are fishing or walking nearby and tolerate them being fairly close, but humans should stay at least 30 feet away, according to Texas Parks & Wildlife Department. Female ‘gators who are defending nests or young are more likely to charge a human who gets close. It is important to remember that an alligator is capable of running faster than you can for short distances.

It is particularly dangerous (and illegal in Texas) to feed alligators, because they lose their shyness and come to expect food from people.

They may become “nuisance” alligators and require relocation or euthanasia. Remember: “A fed ‘gator is a dead ‘gator.”

Do not swim near alligators, especially at night, and do not allow small children to wade or swim in an area with



A baby American alligator, one of several babies that were being watched by mother

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alligators. Keep dogs and small pets away from places with alligators. The only known fatality in Texas occurred in 2015 when a man jumped into the water with a nearby alligator despite being warned.

## Conservation

Hunting and habitat loss resulted in declines in the American alligator, and it received protection in Texas by the late 1960s. It was then federally listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), and populations began to recover soon afterward. In 1987 it was de-listed under the ESA, but it continues to receive some protection in Texas and elsewhere. Currently, American alligators are doing well where there is suitable habitat.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List shows this species as “least concern” throughout its range in Texas and the southeastern U.S.

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