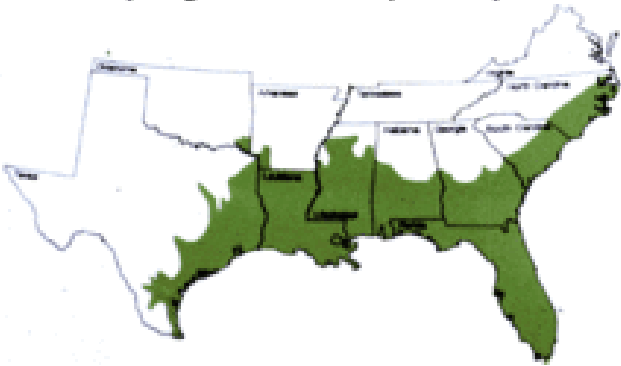


Get to know the American Alligator, *Alligator mississippiensis*

Range of the American Alligator
(*Alligator mississippiensis*)



The American Alligator is the only type of alligator found in North America and is one of just two alligator species in the world, the other being the Chinese alligator. This **reptile** can be found in the southeast United States, fully inhabiting the states of Florida Louisiana as well as parts of Texas, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina.

The American alligator have a low salt tolerance and therefore is most often found in freshwater environments. Although they can be found in brackish water such as wet-

lands, marshes, ponds, swamps, lagoons and rivers. Though American alligators spend time both on land and in water, they are primarily aquatic.

American alligators are known to make structures called alligator holes by burrowing with its snout, tail, and legs into the ground. These holes hold water during the dry season and are areas of safety for alligators during dry periods. Because these holes provide new wet and dry habitats for other creatures, American alligators can be considered **ecosystem engineers**.

The American alligator is the largest reptile in North America.

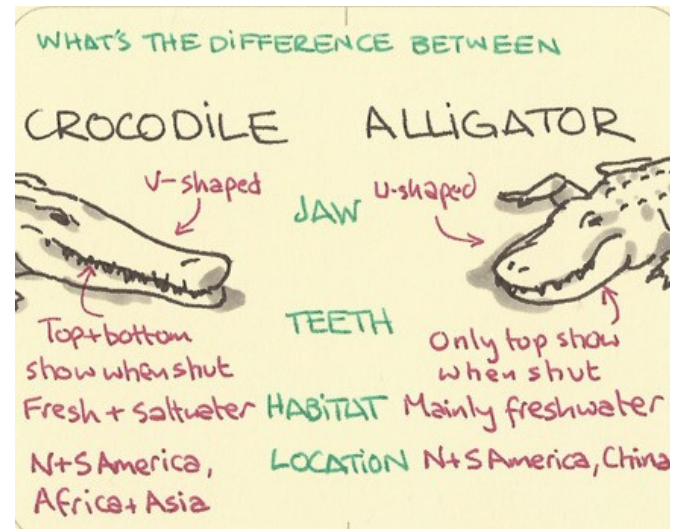
Male and female alligators grow at the same rate until they are

about 3 feet long and then male alligators grow more quickly than females. As a result, adult male alligators are larger than females. Alligators grow rapidly until they are about 20 years old and after the 20 year milestone, they grow at a much slower rate. Adult male alligators average 11 to 15 feet in length while females average 8.5 to 10 feet. A large males can weigh as much as 1000 pounds!



American alligators have black and yellow bands as **juveniles**, but as adults the yellow disappears and the alligator becomes an olive black.

A good way to distinguish alligators from crocodiles is the **snout** and jaw. American alligators have broad, rounded U-shaped snouts, as opposed to the more narrow V-shaped snouts of crocodiles. Additionally, when American alligators close their mouths, only their top teeth are visible because their upper jaw is wider than the lower jaw. Both top and bottom teeth are visible when a crocodile closes its mouth. American alligators have about 80 teeth, all approximately the same size, that are replaced throughout their lifetime.



Alligators are **carnivorous apex predators**. They eat a wide variety of animals including fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals. Alligators are **opportunistic feeders** meaning they are very flexible about what they choose to eat and will sustain themselves with numerous different food sources. Alligator size correlates with the size of prey they may catch. As **hatchlings** they feed mainly on invertebrates and as juveniles they feed mostly on small fish, insects and invertebrates. As they grow larger they start to eat larger mammals and eventually reptiles and birds.

While adult alligators do not have predators, their eggs do. Raccoons, opossums, river otters and crows are all predators of alligator eggs.



Alligators breed only once each year in springtime between April and the end of June. Sexual maturity in alligators is not measured in years but in length. They are sexually mature when they become about 6 feet long. Females take about 10-20 years to achieve this length while males may reach this length in 10-18 years.

Alligators have multiple forms of courtship rituals including a specific courtship bellow, head slapping the surface of the water, snout and back rubbing and blowing bubbles.

The female makes the nest with her tail gathering material from vegetation, sticks, leaves and mud within a 15 foot radius of the area she chooses, typically near a body of water.

The average lifespan of an alligator in the wild is about 35 years. However, they can live to be over 50 years old in captivity.

Egg clutches consist of 35-40 eggs on average with the eggs normally taking about 2 months to hatch. The sex of the alligator is determined by the temperature of **incubation**. An egg will yield a male alligator if incubated at 91.4°F or higher while a female will be formed if the incubation temperature is 86°F or lower. An incubation temperature between 86°F and 91.4°F will produce an even ratio of male and female hatchlings.



Unlike other reptiles like turtles, alligators hatchlings cannot escape the nest on their own immediately after hatching. Instead, the mother carries the babies to a nearby water source once they begin to hatch. Usually, the mother stays in the general vicinity of the babies for about a year in order to protect them. Male alligators do not participate in the rearing of their offspring.

The average lifespan of an alligator in the wild is about 35 years. However, they can live to be over 50 years old in captivity.

Can you tell which is an alligator or a crocodile??



Questions? Contact us! education@namepa.net

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Vocabulary

Apex Predator

Carnivore

Ecosystem Engineer

Hatchling

Incubation

Juvenile

Opportunistic Feeder

Reptile

Snout

NGSS

(DCI) Disciplinary Core Ideas

LS1A – Structure and Function

LS1C – Organization for matter and energy flow in organisms

LS2A – Interdependent relationships in ecosystems

LS2B – Energy transfer in ecosystems

LS2C – Ecosystems dynamics and Functioning

LS2D – Social interactions and group behavior

References:

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Seay, K. 2019. "Alligator mississippiensis" (On-line), Animal Diversity Web. Accessed August 22, 2020 at https://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Alligator_mississippiensis/