



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# American Alligator

## *Alligator mississippiensis*

A member of the crocodile family, the American alligator is a living fossil from the Age of Reptiles, having survived on earth for 200 million years.

American alligator populations reached all-time lows in the 1950s, primarily due to market-hunting and habitat loss. However, in 1987, the alligator was pronounced fully recovered, making it one of the first endangered species success stories.

Today, alligators are found throughout the Southeast, from the Carolinas to Texas and north to Arkansas.

### Description and Diet

The alligator can be distinguished from the crocodile by its head shape and color. The crocodile has a narrower snout, and unlike the alligator, has lower jaw teeth that are visible even when its mouth is shut. In addition, adult alligators are black, while crocodiles are brownish in color.

The alligator has a large, slightly rounded body, with thick limbs, a broad head, and a very powerful tail that it uses to propel itself through water. The tail accounts for half the alligator's length. While alligators move very quickly in water, they are generally slow-moving on land, although they can be quick for short distances.

Alligators will eat just about anything, but primarily consume fish, turtles, and snails. Small animals that come to the water's edge to drink make easy prey. Young alligators mostly feed on insects, crustaceans, snails, and fish.

### Biological Role

As during the Reptile Age, alligators live in wetlands, vital habitat that holds the key to their continued



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survival. Alligators depend on wetlands—and in some ways wetlands depend on them. As predators at the top of the food chain, they help control numbers of rodents and other animals that might overtax the marshland vegetation.

The alligator's greatest value to the marsh and other animals within it are the "gator holes" that many adults create and expand through the years. An alligator uses its mouth and claws to uproot vegetation to clear out a space; then, shoving with its body and slashing with its powerful tail, it wallows out a depression that stays full of water in the wet season and holds water after the rains stop. During the dry season, and particularly during extended droughts, gator holes provide vital water for fish, insects, crustaceans, snakes, turtles, birds, and other animals in addition to the alligator itself.

Sometimes, the alligator may expand its gator hole by digging beneath

an overhanging bank to create a hidden den. After tunneling as far as 20 feet, it enlarges the end, making a chamber with a ceiling high enough above water level to permit breathing. This is not the alligator's nest but merely a place for the reptile to survive the dry season and winter.

### Breeding and Life History

The breeding season begins in the spring. Although alligators have no vocal cords, males bellow loudly to attract mates and warn off other males during this time by sucking air into their lungs and blowing it out in intermittent, deep-toned roars.

The female builds a nest of vegetation, sticks, leaves, and mud in a sheltered spot in or near the water. After she lays 20 to 50 white, goose-egg sized eggs, she covers them under more vegetation, which, like mulch, heats as it decays, helping to keep the eggs warm. She remains near the nest throughout the 65-day incubation period, protecting the nest from intruders. When the



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young begin to hatch, they emit a high-pitched croaking noise, and the female quickly digs them out. The young, tiny replicas of adult alligators with a series of yellow bands around their bodies, then find their way to water. For several days they continue to live on yolk masses within their bellies.

Alligators reach breeding maturity between the ages of 8 and 13 years, at which time they are about 6 to 7 feet long. From then on, growth continues at a slower rate. Old males may grow to be 14 feet long and weigh up to 1,000 pounds during a lifespan of 30 years or more.

**Decline and Recovery**

Historically, alligators were depleted from many parts of their range as a result of market-hunting and habitat loss. Forty years ago many people believed this unique reptile would never recover. In 1967, under a law that preceded the Endangered Species Act of 1973, the alligator was listed as endangered, meaning it was considered in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range.

A combined effort by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and State wildlife agencies in the South saved these unique animals. The Endangered Species Act prohibited alligator hunting, allowing the species to rebound in numbers in many areas where it had been depleted. As it began to make a comeback, States established alligator monitoring programs and used the information to ensure that numbers continued to increase. In 1987, the Fish and Wildlife Service pronounced the American alligator fully recovered and consequently removed the animal from the list of endangered species.

Although the American alligator is secure, some related animals—such as several species of crocodiles and caimans—are still in trouble. For this reason, the Fish and Wildlife Service continues to protect the alligator under the ESA classification as “threatened due to similarity of appearance.” The Service thus regulates the harvest of alligators and legal trade in the animals, their skins, and products made from them, as part of efforts to prevent the illegal take and trafficking of endangered “look-alike” reptiles.

The story of the American alligator is one of both drastic decline and complete recovery. A story of State and Federal cooperation, it is truly one of the prominent successes of the Nation’s endangered species program.



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**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Endangered Species Program  
4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Room 420  
Arlington, VA 22203  
703-358-2390  
<http://www.fws.gov/endangered/>**

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Southeast Region  
1875 Century Boulevard, N. E.  
Atlanta, Georgia 30345  
404-679-7100  
<http://www.fws.gov/southeast/>**

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(top): American alligator  
(middle): Alligator hatching from the egg  
(bottom): American alligator den