

# American Alligator

*Alligator mississippiensis*

**Class:** *Reptilia*

**Order:** *Crocodylia*

**Family:** *Alligatoridae*

**Characteristics:** The average size of an adult female American alligator is 8 feet while a male averages 11 feet. They can weigh up to 1,000 pounds. They have a long snout and the eyes and nostrils are located on top so they can see and breathe while their body remains under water. The easiest way to distinguish between a crocodile and an alligator is to look at the jaw. In an alligator, the fourth tooth on the lower jaw fits perfectly into a socket in the upper jaw and is NOT visible when the mouth is closed. This is not the case in crocodiles. They have incredibly powerful jaws and the teeth are replaced as they wear down. Alligators can go through 2,000-3,000 teeth in a lifetime.

**Behavior:** Female alligators usually remain in a small area while males can have territories up to two square miles. The young will remain in their mothers' areas until they are three years old and then will leave in search of food or are driven out by the large males. Alligators undergo a sort of dormancy when the weather is cold. They will excavate a "gator hole" along a waterway or dig tunnels in areas where water fluctuates. These hollows provide them protection against hot and cold weather and are often used by other animals once the gator has left. Alligators do not have salt glands so they can only tolerate salt water for a brief time ([National Zoo](#)).

**Reproduction:** Both males and females reach sexual maturity around 10-12 years, or when they reach about 6 feet long. They breed at night in shallow water and breeding season is from April-May. After mating, the female builds a nest on land out of vegetation in June or July where she lays up to 90 (average is 30-50) eggs that will hatch in late August and will "[chirp](#)" to let mom know they are hatching and she will then remove the nesting material from around the eggs.

**Diet:** Wild: Carnivores-turtles, fish, snail, invertebrates, birds, frogs, mammals, snakes, lizards

Zoo: fish

**Conservation:** Alligators have made an amazing comeback in the U.S. and have been upgraded to Threatened. In some places, hunting is allowed although highly regulated.

**FYI:** Alligators have temperature-dependent sex determination meaning the temperature of the nest determines the sex of the hatchlings. Above 93° F are male and below 86° F are female.



## Range & Habitat:

Found in slow-moving freshwater rivers from North Carolina to the Rio Grande in Texas



**Lifespan:** average 50 years in captivity, 30 years in the wild.

**Special Adaptations:** Stealthy predators well adapted to aquatic life

## IUCN Conservation Status:

Least Concern; considered threatened in the U.S.

