



KATHY HICKS

# American Alligator

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## *Alligator mississippiensis*

The American alligator, often called “gator” for short, is one of the largest reptiles in the world. Males can grow to 19 feet in length and weigh up to 900 pounds, while females are usually smaller.

### DESCRIPTION

The entire body of an alligator is covered with large horny plates that protect it from predators and other alligators. It has short legs with five toes joined by webbing at the base on the front legs and four webbed toes on the back legs. Alligators have broad heads with short, rounded snouts. Their eyes, ears and nostrils are located on top of the head so they can be used while partially submerged in water.

The tail is usually at least half the body length and laterally flattened, which helps propel the animal through the water. Large jaws with 80 teeth aid in capturing and killing the alligator’s prey.

### DISTRIBUTION AND HABITAT

American alligators are found from the southern border of Virginia and North Carolina down the eastern seaboard of the United States and westward along the Gulf of Mexico to Texas and throughout Central America.

American alligators can be found throughout their range in freshwater swamps, marshes, rivers, lakes and streams.

They prefer water sources that don’t go dry in the summer months and that provide an abundance of food.

### DIET

Alligators are carnivorous, feeding mostly on fish, birds, snakes, turtles and small mammals, mostly at night. Alligators are unable to chew their food so they must swallow it whole or in large chunks. They usually lie and wait for a meal to come by, then capture and drown it. If given the opportunity to capture large prey, they will drag it under water and lodge it beneath logs or stumps and come back later to finish it off. They must return to the surface to consume it since they cannot swallow under water.

### REPRODUCTION


Mating season for alligators is April through May and breeding occurs in open water. After conception, the female will construct a nest of vegetation and mud where she will lay 30 to 70 eggs. She will then cover them with a mound of vegetation that serves as an incubator for the eggs. The temperature inside the mound determines the sex of the young with more males being produced at higher temperatures.

Eggs typically hatch after nine weeks. Once hatched, the young alligators begin

to make a squeaking sound, which signals the mother to break open the nest and lead them to the water. The young are about 9 inches long at birth and will stay with the mother for 18 months until she hatches the next year’s litter.

### CONSERVATION STATUS

American alligators were once pushed to the brink of extinction by market hunters and trappers who sold their hides and meat. In the 1960s, regulations were enacted to protect alligators in Alabama and they were placed on the federal endangered species list. Since then, due to significant conservation efforts, the American alligator has been restored throughout much of its original range. It is no longer an endangered species but is still listed as threatened due to similarity to other species.

A regulated hunting season for alligators has been in place in select parts of Alabama for several years. The population of the alligator in the state remains stable. 

## FACTS ABOUT AMERICAN ALLIGATOR

- ▶ Alligators have valves to close their ears and nostrils when submerged allowing them to stay under water for 45 to 60 minutes.
- ▶ An adult alligator will eat 20 pounds of food a week during warm weather but can go for weeks without eating during the winter.
- ▶ Alligators grow about 1 foot per year for the first four years of their life. When they reach 6 feet in length most alligators are sexually mature. Because they typically grow faster, males tend to reach sexual maturity earlier than females.