



American Alligator

(Alligator Mississippiensis)

The American alligator, a member of the crocodile family, can be found in marshes, swamps, shallow lakes, ponds, and waterways in the southeastern United States—from Texas to Florida and as far north as the Carolinas and southern Arkansas. Adults can weigh over 500 pounds and grow to 8-13 feet in length.

American alligators are predators and eat a wide variety of foods including fish, turtles, snakes, birds, and small mammals. The American alligator has existed for over 180 million years. They are well-adapted to the Southeast's warm water environments. Their tube-shaped bodies, webbed back feet, powerful tails, and short, strong legs help them maneuver quickly through water. On land they are a bit slower, but they can move quickly over short distances. Like other reptiles, alligators are ectothermic, meaning they have little to no internal method to control their body temperatures. Because their body temperature is dependent on temperatures found in their environment, in cool weather, alligators will bask in the sun or remain in warm water. If too hot, they will immerse themselves in cooler water. If the temperature drops below 55 degrees Fahrenheit or so, they become dormant, staying in dens or burrows located in or near the water.

Wetlands and other shallow waterways are critical to the survival of American alligators. Interestingly, these shallow wet ecosystems also rely on the alligator. The alligator helps prevent many wildlife species from becoming overpopulated and decimating wetland plants. American alligators also dig deep depressions or “gator” holes for shelter. These deeper areas provide much-needed water for wetland plants and wildlife during times of extended drought. Because of its unique role, many biologists have designated the American alligator as a keystone species, a species that is critical to sustaining an ecosystem.

During the early colonization of the southeastern United States, alligator populations remained fairly stable throughout most of their range. However, at the end of the 19th century, alligator-hide boots, wallets, purses, and belts became fashionable. Market hunters began to take alligators in large

numbers to supply the fashion industry. In the 1920s, market hunters killed about 200,000 alligators each year just in the state of Florida!

During this same time period, thousands of wetlands were drained in the Southeast to provide more land for agriculture and development, and to limit mosquito populations. With the combined pressures of habitat loss and market hunting, alligator populations plummeted. By the 1950s, the American alligator was on the verge of extinction.

Between the 1940s and the 1960s, the southeastern states began protecting their remaining alligator populations. Then, in 1967, the American alligator was placed on the federal endangered species list, which provided it complete protection. It remained on the list under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as well. This act emphasizes protection and recovery of endangered species and helps provide funding for research and recovery projects. An amendment to the Lacey Act and CITES II (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) also protected this alligator by regulating interstate and international commerce in alligator products.

These laws in combination with habitat protection and restoration, law enforcement, reintroduction (in some states), effective management, and changes in attitudes enabled the American alligator populations to flourish. In 1987, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service pronounced the American alligator as fully recovered and removed it from the endangered species list. However, alligators resemble several related species that are still in peril, such as some crocodiles and caimans; therefore the American alligator is listed as “Threatened by Similarity in Appearance” throughout its entire range. This classification allows for great flexibility in managing alligators while still affording protection to related species.

While American alligator populations continue to grow in the southeastern United States, the human population, along with associated land development, also continues to grow. Many people want to live along water, so waterfront properties have become



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prime areas for housing developments. People share these waterways with alligators while fishing, boating, and swimming. Increased contact has led to greater conflict between people and alligators. Although these reptiles typically stay away from people, some will enter backyards, ponds, golf courses, or even swimming pools as they move from one location to another or come out to bask in the sun. Some alligators may also have lost their fear of people as the result of being fed by people. Minimizing contacts between people and alligators is imperative, since alligators are large predators and have been known to prey on household pets.

As the American alligator continues to thrive, wildlife agencies must balance the needs of this keystone species with the needs of people. To help manage and even reduce alligator populations where needed, closely monitored and regulated hunting and trapping is permitted throughout the

animal's range. Agencies also provide education to help people understand the role of the alligator and recommendations on how to safely share the environment with alligators. While the market is not as large as it once was, alligator hides and meat are still valued commodities. To meet this demand, alligator farming has become a successful business. Additionally, depending on the state, permitted hunters and trappers can sell the meat or hide.

American alligators remain protected on state, federal, and international levels to help ensure their continued survival and to help protect other members of the crocodylian family whose hides are similar in appearance to the alligators'.

NOTE: The American crocodile, a relative to the American alligator, is endangered. South America has several species of alligators, called caimans, as well as two crocodile species. Caimans are sometimes sold in pet stores.

