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American Alligator

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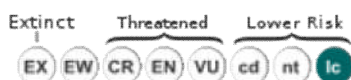
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Alligator mississippiensis



An American Alligator in captivity at the Columbus Zoo, in Powell, Ohio

[Conservation status](#)



[Least Concern \(IUCN 2.3\)](#)

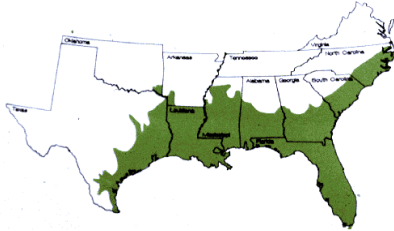
[Scientific classification](#)

Kingdom: [Animalia](#)
Phylum: [Chordata](#)
Class: [Sauropsida](#)
Order: [Crocodylia](#)
Family: [Alligatoridae](#)
Genus: [Alligator](#)
Species: *A. mississippiensis*

[Binomial name](#)

Alligator mississippiensis
([Daudin](#), 1801)

Range of the American Alligator
(*Alligator mississippiensis*)



American Alligator range map

The **American Alligator**, *Alligator mississippiensis*, (known colloquially as simply **gator**) is one of the two living [species](#) of [Alligator](#), a genus within the family [Alligatoridae](#). The American Alligator is only native to the [Southeastern United States](#), where it inhabits wetlands that frequently overlap with human-populated areas. It is larger than the other extant alligator species, the [Chinese Alligator](#).

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[\[edit\]](#) Anatomy



Forelimb showing the large claws and slight webbing between the toes.



Tail which is for aquatic propulsion and as a weapon of defense

The American Alligator has a large, slightly rounded body, with thick limbs, a broad head, and a very powerful tail. They generally have a olive, brown, gray or nearly black color with a creamy white underside. Algae-laden waters produce greener skin, while tannic acid from overhanging trees can produce often darker skin.^[*citation needed*] Adult male alligators are typically 13 to 14.7 feet long (3.96 to 4.48 meters), while adult females average 9.8 feet (2.99 meters).^{[1][2]} The heaviest male alligators can reach weights of up to 473.1 kilograms (1,043 lb), while females can grow to as much as 129.3 kilograms (285 lb).^[3] One American Alligator allegedly reached a length of 19 feet, 2 inches (5.8 meters),^[4] which would make it the largest recorded. The tail, which accounts for half of the alligator's total length, is primarily used for aquatic propulsion. The tail can also be used as a weapon of defense when an alligator feels threatened. Alligators travel very quickly in water while they are generally slow-moving on land and can lunge short distances very quickly. They have five claws on each front foot and four on each rear foot. American Alligators have the strongest bite of any living animal, measured at up to 9452 [newtons](#) in laboratory conditions.^[5]

Some alligators are missing an inhibited [gene](#) for [melanin](#), which makes them [albino](#). These alligators are extremely rare and practically impossible to find in the wild. They could survive only in captivity. Like all [albino](#) animals, they are very vulnerable to the sun and predators.^[6]

[\[edit\]](#) Habitat

American alligators are mostly found in the [Southeastern United States](#), from [Merchants Millpond State Park](#) in [North Carolina](#) south to [Everglades National Park](#) in [Florida](#) and west to the southern tip of [Texas](#). They are also found in the [U.S. states](#) of [North Carolina](#), [South Carolina](#), [Georgia](#), [Florida](#), [Alabama](#), [Mississippi](#), [Arkansas](#), [Louisiana](#), [Texas](#), and [Oklahoma](#).

Although primarily [freshwater](#) animals, alligators will occasionally venture into [brackish water](#).^[7] Alligators live in [wetlands](#) and this is the vital habitat that holds the key to their continued long-term survival. Alligators depend on the wetlands, and in some ways the wetlands depend on them. As [apex predators](#), they help control the population of rodents and other animals that might overtax the [marshland](#) vegetation.

American alligators are less susceptible to cold than [American Crocodiles](#). Unlike the American Crocodile which would quickly succumb and drown in water of 7.2 degrees, an alligator can survive in such temperatures for some time without apparent discomfort.^[8] It is thought that this adaptiveness is the reason why American alligators spread farther north than the American Crocodile.^[8] In fact, the American alligator is the most northerly distributed of all crocodylians and the one most equipped to deal with cooler conditions.^[9]

[\[edit\]](#) Gator holes



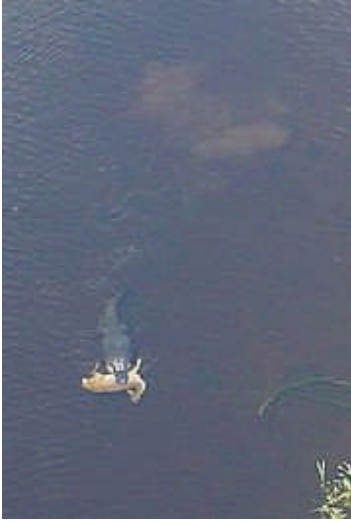
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The alligator's greatest value to the marsh and the other animals that inhabit it are the "gator holes" that many adults create and expand on over a period of years.^[10] An alligator uses its mouth and claws to uproot vegetation to clear out a space; 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 (6 m), it enlarges the den, making a chamber with a ceiling high enough above water level to permit breathing. This is not the alligator's nest but merely a way for the reptile to survive the dry season and winters.

[\[edit\]](#) Diet



Alligators are [apex predators](#) capable of killing large terrestrial prey. This large American alligator has caught an adult deer.

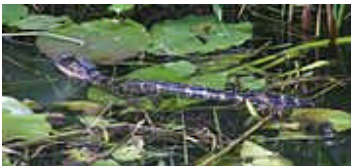
Alligators eat [fish](#), [birds](#), [turtles](#), [snakes](#), [mammals](#), and [amphibians](#). Hatchlings, however, are restricted to smaller prey items like [invertebrates](#), [Insects](#) and [larvae](#), [snails](#), [spiders](#), and [worms](#) make-up a big portion of a hatchling's diet. They will also eat small [fish](#) at any opportunity. As they grow, they gradually move onto larger [fish](#), [mollusks](#), [frogs](#) and small mammals like [rats](#), and [mice](#). Sub adult alligators take a larger variety of prey ranging from a [snake](#) or [turtle](#) to a [bird](#) and moderate sized [mammals](#) like a [raccoon](#).

Once an alligator reaches adulthood, any animal living in the water or coming to the water to drink is potential prey. Adult alligators will eat [razorbacks](#), [deer](#), domestic animals including [cattle](#) and [sheep](#), and are often known to kill and eat smaller alligators. In rare instances, large male alligators have been known to take down a [Florida panther](#) and an [American Black Bear](#), making the American alligator the [apex predator](#) throughout its distribution.^[11] The American alligator is known as King of the Everglades.^[12]

The stomachs of alligators often contain [gastroliths](#). The function of these stones is to grind up food in the stomach and help with digestion. This is important because gators swallow their food whole. These [gastroliths](#) are also used in [buoyancy](#) control.

In 2002, the bite force on a 12 foot alligator was measured to be about 2100 pounds.^[13]

[\[edit\]](#) **Reproduction**





A juvenile American Alligator showing the distinctive yellow striping found on juveniles.

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.



A young American alligator swimming.

The female builds a [nest](#) of vegetation, sticks, leaves, and mud in a sheltered spot in or near the water. After she lays her 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. This differs from [Nile crocodiles](#) who lay their eggs in pits.^[8] The temperature at which alligator eggs develop determines their sex. Those eggs which are hatched in temperatures ranging from 90–93 °Fahrenheit (32.2–33.8 °C) turn out to be male, while those in temperatures from 82–86 °Fahrenheit (27.7–30 °C) end up being female. Intermediate temperature ranges have proven to yield a mix of both male and females. The female will remain near the nest throughout the 65-day [incubation](#) period, protecting the nest from intruders. When the young begin to hatch they emit a high-pitched croaking noise, and the female quickly digs them out.

The young, which are 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. The baby spends about 5 months with the mother before leaving her

Alligators reach breeding maturity at about 8 to 13 years of age, at which time they are about 6 to 7 feet (1.8–2.1 m) long. From then on, growth continues at a slower rate. The oldest males may grow to be 16 feet (4.85 m)^[14] long and weigh up to 1,200 pounds (510 kg) during a lifespan of 30 or more years.

[\[edit\]](#) Alligators and humans

Alligators are capable of killing humans, but are generally wary enough not to see them as a potential prey. Alligator bites are serious injuries due to the risk of infection. Inadequate treatment or neglect of an alligator bite may result in an infection that necessitates [amputation](#) of a limb.^[15] The alligator's tail is a fearsome weapon capable of knocking a person down and breaking bones. Alligators are protective parents who will


protect their young by attacking anything that comes too close or looks like it's aggressive and could kill one of the baby alligators.

Since 1948, there have been more than 275 unprovoked attacks on humans in Florida, of which at least 17 resulted in death.^[16] There were only nine fatal attacks in the U.S. throughout the 70s, 80s, and 90s, but alligators killed 12 people from 2001 to 2007. In May 2006, alligators killed three Floridians in four days, two of them in the same day^[citation needed].

Several Florida tourist attractions have taken advantage of fears and myths about alligators -- as well as the reality of their danger -- through a practice known as alligator wrestling. Created in the early 20th Century by some members of the [Seminole](#) Tribe of Florida, this tourism tradition continues to the present day^[17]

[\[edit\]](#) Endangered species recovery



 An albino alligator could survive only in captivity.

Historically, alligators were depleted from many parts of their range as a result of market hunting and loss of habitat, and 30 years ago many people believed this unique reptile would never recover. In 1967, the alligator was listed as an endangered species (under a law that preceded the [Endangered Species Act](#) of 1973), meaning it was considered in danger of [extinction](#) throughout all or a significant portion of its range.

A combined effort by the [United States Fish and Wildlife Service](#), state wildlife agencies in the [South](#), and the creation of large, commercial alligator farms saved these unique animals. The Endangered Species Act outlawed alligator [hunting](#), allowing the species to rebound in numbers in many areas where it had been depleted. As the alligator began to make a comeback, states established alligator population monitoring programs and used this information to ensure alligator 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. The Fish and Wildlife Service still regulates the legal trade in alligator skins and products made from them.

Although the American alligator is secure, some related animals — such as several species of crocodiles and [caimans](#) — are still in trouble.

[\[edit\]](#) Dangers in Florida



An American alligator and a Burmese Python locked in struggle. Photo by Lori Oberhofer, National Park Service.

In [Florida](#), alligators face ambient temperature patterns unlike elsewhere in their range. The consistently high temperatures lead to increased [metabolic](#) cost.

Alligators in the [Everglades](#) have reduced length to weight ratio, reduced total length, and delayed onset of sexual maturity compared with other parts of their range. The reason for this poor condition is currently suspected to be a combination of low food availability and sustained high temperatures.

Additionally, the Everglades National Park has confirmed in 2003 that there is a significant population of [Burmese Pythons](#) in Florida. These non-native snakes have sometimes won ^{[18][19]} and sometimes lost (see adjacent image) ^[20] in battles with alligators, but the introduction of a potential predator could have a devastating impact on an endangered species as many have been found in the stomachs of these invaders. ^[20]

[\[edit\]](#) Farming

Alligator farming is a big and growing industry in Georgia, Florida, Texas and Louisiana. These states produce a combined annual total of some 45,000 alligator hides. Alligator hides bring good prices and hides in the 6 to 7 feet (1.8 to 2.1 m) range have sold for \$300 each, though the price can fluctuate considerably from year to year. The market for alligator meat is growing and approximately 300,000 pounds (140,000 kg) of meat is produced annually. According to the [Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services](#), raw alligator meat contains roughly 200 calories per 3 ounces (85 g) serving size, of which 27 calories come from fat. ^[21]

Alligator meat is sometimes used in [jambalayas](#), [soups](#), and [stew](#)

[\[edit\]](#) See also

- [Alligator](#)
- [Alligatoridae](#)
- [American Crocodile](#)

- [List of fatal alligator attacks in the United States by decade](#)

[[edit](#)] Notes

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[[edit](#)] External links



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- [Crocodilian Online](#)
- [Photo exhibit on alligators in Florida; from State Archives of Florida](#)
- [Thermoregulation of the American Alligator in the Everglades](#)
- [American Alligator information sheet](#)
- [Podcast of an interview with a Seminole alligator wrestler; from State Archives of Florida](#)
- [U.S. Fishery and Wildlife Service - alligator bellows and hisses](#)

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Extant [Crocodilian](#) species

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Family [Gavialidae](#)

[Tomistoma](#) False gharial (*T. schlegelii*)

[Gavialis](#) Gharial (*G. gangeticus*)

[hide]

Family [Alligatoridae](#)

[Alligatorinae](#)
(Alligators)

American Alligator (*A. mississippiensis*) • **Chinese Alligator** (*A. sinensis*)

[Caimaninae](#)
(Caimans)

[Paleosuchus](#) Cuvier's Dwarf Caiman (*P. palpebrosus*) • Smooth-fronted Caiman (*P. trigonatus*)

[Caiman](#) Spectacled Caiman (*C. crocodilus*) • Broad-snouted Caiman (*C. latirostris*) • Yacare Caiman (*C. yacare*)

[Melanosuchus](#) Black Caiman (*M. niger*)

[show]

Family [Crocodylidae](#) (Crocodiles)

[Crocodylinae](#)

[Crocodylus](#) American Crocodile (*C. acutus*) • Slender-snouted Crocodile (*C. cataphractus*) • Orinoco Crocodile (*C. intermedius*) • Freshwater Crocodile (*C. johnsoni*) • Philippine crocodile (*C. mindorensis*) • Morelet's Crocodile (*C. moreletii*) • Nile crocodile (*C. niloticus*) • New Guinea Crocodile (*C. novaeguineae*) • Mugger Crocodile (*C. palustris*) • Saltwater Crocodile (*C. porosus*) • Cuban Crocodile (*C. rhombifer*) • Siamese Crocodile (*C. siamensis*)

Osteolaemus [Dwarf Crocodile \(*O. tetraspis*\)](#)

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