

American Alligator

Alligator mississippiensis

Reptile

Scientific Name

Alligator mississippiensis

Other Names

Gator

Range

Southeastern United States

Habitat

Wetlands

Average Size

Length: 10 – 14 ft.

Weight: 450 – 600 lbs.

Description

A large, heavily armored and thick bodied crocodylian with thick limbs and a long, ridged tail. The color ranges from olive green to gray or black, with hatchlings striped in yellow and orange. Males are substantially larger than females.

Lifespan

In the wild: Up to 50 years

In human care: 60 + years

Diet

In the wild: Fish, frogs, turtles, birds and small mammals

In human care: Fish, crickets and prepared alligator diet

Incubation period

65 days

Clutch Size

20 to 60 eggs

Sexual Maturity

8 – 13 years of age, after reaching 6 feet in length

Predators

Snakes, turtles, raccoons, birds of prey and humans

Population Status

Not threatened



Behavior

Alligators are territorial animals, with the largest males and females being solitary in their defended area. Smaller individuals have a higher tolerance for other alligators and they can be seen sunning in close proximity to one another. They are primarily nocturnal feeders, lying in the sun by day to bask in the heat. Although only capable of small bursts of movement on land, they are excellent swimmers moving with rapid ease in the water and can stay submerged for hours at a time.

Alligators have better senses than most other reptiles with eyesight, hearing and sense of smell all very well honed. Alligators hunt by dragging their prey under water, using a series of body rolls to rip off pieces that can be swallowed whole. Known as the "death roll" this behavior is even seen in young hatchlings.

Reproduction and Breeding

The breeding season begins in spring, with males bellowing loudly to attract mates and warn off other males. The deep-toned roars are made by the alligator actually sucking air into their lungs and blowing it out in intermittent patches.

The female builds a nest of vegetation, sticks, leaves, and mud in a sheltered spot in or near the water. After she lays her eggs, she covers them under more vegetation, which, like mulch, heats as it decays, helping to keep the eggs warm. The gender of the developing alligators depends upon the temperature at which they are incubated, with those hatching at temperatures from 90 to 93 °F becoming males, and those in temperatures from 82 to 86 °F becoming female. Intermediate temperature ranges have proven to yield a mix of both male and females.

The female will remain near the nest throughout the incubation period, protecting the nest from intruders. When the young begin to hatch they emit a high-pitched croaking noise, and the mother quickly digs them out. In some cases the female may assist the young by carrying them in her mouth to the water's edge if it is too far for them to venture on their own. Although there is no real degree of parental care, those hatchlings that remain near the female will benefit from her protection. After about five months, the young gators begin to move away from their mother to survive on their own, but will remain in the same general area for up to two years. *(Continued on back)*

The Sacramento Zoological Society
3930 West Land Park Dr., Sacramento, CA 95822
T: 916-808-5888 F: 916-264-7385 E: info@saczoo.org

www.saczoo.org



Conservation

The American alligator was put on the Endangered Species List in 1967, but was taken off the list in 1987 after it was deemed they had made a complete recovery. Although they are not protected, and considered stable in almost all parts of their range, they still face a variety of conservation concerns. Water quality and pollution issues, as well as loss of wetland habitat are constant threats to the species. The most looming issue, however, is the confrontation between gators and humans. Expanding development in their habitat and the colonization of stormwater (freshwater catchment) lagoons along golf courses has forced an increase in interactions with resident humans. As populations increase and tourism booms along coastal habitats, there are more and more situations where alligators are being fed and therefore, must ultimately be removed from the population.

The Sacramento Zoo works to educate the public on how to co-exist with the wildlife in their residential areas, and supports many conservation organizations that give residents the tools to do so safely.

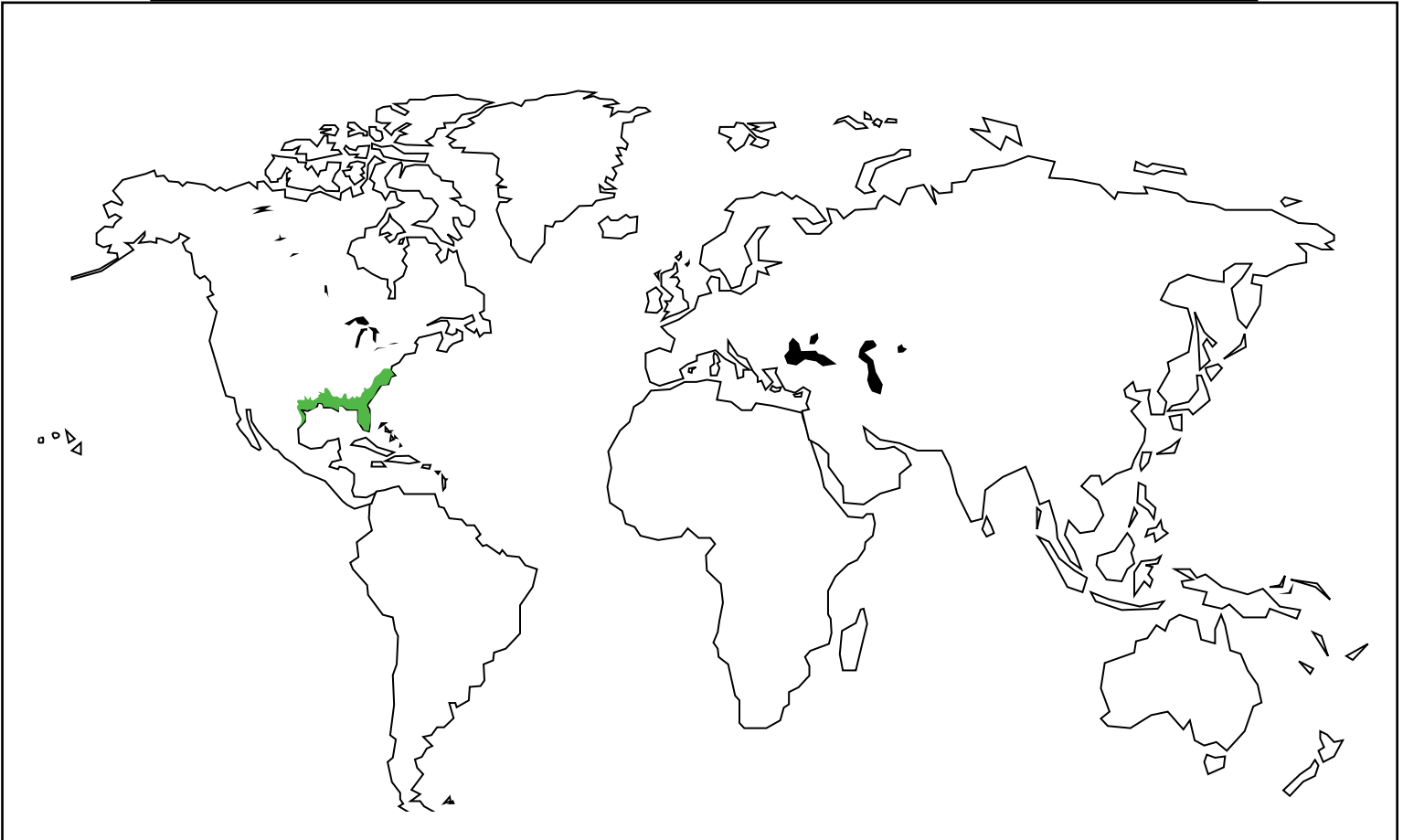
Amazing Facts

There is only one other species of alligator in the world, the smaller Chinese alligator.

The American alligator is the largest reptile in North America.

This species can grow roughly one foot per year.

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