

American Alligator

Alligator mississippiensis



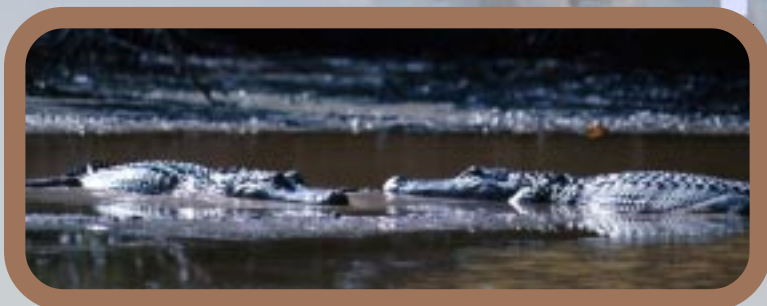
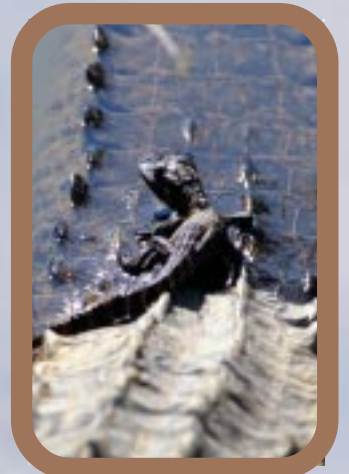
It is hard to believe that this awesome reptile was almost eliminated from much of its natural range. Federal protection, by the Endangered Species Act in 1973, has allowed this primitive-looking beast to make a strong comeback in the last three decades. Alligators are still protected by law and cannot be captured or killed without proper permits. Alligators can be found in rivers, swamps, salt marshes, Carolina bays, and other wetlands across the Southeast.

Alligators can be seen any month of the year in warm weather. They are often seen basking in the sun on land, or resting in shallow water during the day. They feed very little during the winter months because their bodies are unable to digest food at lower temperatures. A fun way to observe alligators is to “shine” them at night using a flashlight or headlamp. Their bright red eyeshine can be seen from a considerable distance across the water.

Alligators mate in the autumn and spring, and females build their nest mounds in the early summer. Approximately 20 – 60 eggs are deposited in nests built out of reeds, leaves, and other vegetation. The females guard these nests against raccoons and other predators until the babies hatch about 2 months later. Female alligators will protect the young for a year or more after they hatch. The 8-inch babies grow about one foot a year, until they reach adult size.

Adult alligators average 6-10 feet in length, with males being significantly larger than females. Alligators have heavy bone structure and massive skulls. Their jaws can exert incredible force, allowing them to crush turtles, snakes, birds, fish, and anything else small enough to eat. Even though alligators are powerful predators, they rarely attack people. An attack usually involves an animal that has been fed and has lost its fear of humans.

Savannah River Ecology Laboratory (SREL) scientists have studied many aspects of alligator ecology on the Savannah River Site for 30 years. SREL researchers collected one of the largest alligators ever recorded in the state of South Carolina in 1996. This 12-foot 10-inch male was first collected in the 1970's, by SREL researchers, as a 2-foot-long juvenile.



*Photos by David Scott. Written by Tony Mills.
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