GEORGIA AQUARIUM ANIMAL FACT SHEET

American Alligator

Alligator mississippiensis

Range/Habitat

- The American alligator occurs in the Southeastern U. S. in the following states: Alabama, Arkansas, North and South Carolina, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma and Texas.
- It is found primarily in freshwater swamps and marshes, as well as in rivers, lakes and smaller bodies of water. Individuals can also be encountered in ditches, drainage canals, subdivision waterways, golf course ponds and roadways.
- This species can tolerate low levels of salinity for short periods and is occasionally found in brackish water around mangrove swamps.

Physical Characteristics

- Adult male American alligators typically reach 13 to 14.7 feet (4.0 - 4.5 m), although there are several unconfirmed reports of individuals up to 16.4 feet (5 m) in length. Females reach lengths of about 9.8 feet (3 m). The tail makes up about one half the body length.
- The snout is characteristically broad, with captive animals having a significantly broader snout compared to wild animals, mainly due to differences in diet.
- The upper jaw is wider than the lower jaw and completely overlaps it so that the edge of the upper jaw overlaps teeth in the lower jaw. These teeth fit into depressions in the upper jaw and are almost completely hidden when the mouth is closed. *This is in contrast to crocodiles in which the lower teeth fit into depressions on the outside of the upper jaw.*
- Juveniles have black backs with bright yellow cross-bands. Older alligators gradually lose the yellow banding and turn olive brown and black, although areas around the jaws and on the neck and belly are creamy white. The ventral surface of the body is pale.
- The number of teeth varies from 74 to 80. New teeth grow to replace lost or damaged ones.

Diet/Feeding

- Juveniles consume a wide variety of small invertebrates, particularly insects, and small fish and frogs. As they grow larger their dietary range increases and includes larger prey.
- Large adults will attack nearly all aquatic and terrestrial prey that comes within range. This mostly includes fish, turtles, small mammals, birds and reptiles, including small alligators.
- Adults are opportunistic feeders and will consume carrion on occasion. They may also expand their choice of prey to include small dogs and other pets.

Conservation Status

- The American alligator is ranked as “low risk, least concern” on the IUCN Red List.
- It is included in Appendix II of CITES to assist in the control of trade in other crocodilian species whose skins are similar in appearance.
- The populations of this species in the U.S. were severely depleted in most areas during the first half of the twentieth century due to over-exploitation. Legislative protection was afforded to it in the 1960s and conservation efforts and monitoring were initiated. The recovery has been remarkable, current wild populations are estimated to be in the millions. Most protective regulations have been rescinded.

Additional Information

- There are estimated to be about 200,000 American alligators in Georgia. They occur south of the “fall line”, which runs roughly from Columbus through Macon to Augusta. Any individuals found north of this line were transported there by humans, since the weather is too cold for natural reproduction in these areas. There were eight reported cases of alligator attacks on humans in Georgia between 1980 and 2001. None were fatal.
- When left alone, alligators will stay away from people and pose little threat. However, in some places, people feed alligators, which is extremely dangerous and encourages alligators to approach people expecting food. In some areas the species is considered a nuisance or a danger and removal programs are required.
- Recovery of the species from near extinction is partly due to programs of captive rearing and reintroduction of juveniles into habitats alligators formerly occupied (e.g., in Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana). Proper management practices, including controlled hunting, are ongoing to ensure the sustainability of the populations.
- This alligator has an elaborate courtship ritual involving low-frequency bellowing, head-slapping on the surface of the water, complex body posturing, touching and release of musk-like scents. Fertilization is internal. The female builds a mound nest of vegetation and mud that is elevated above any high water mark. She digs a conical nest on top, deposits 20 to 50 eggs in it and then covers them with vegetation. The female remains nearby during the 65-day incubation period, defending the nest from predators. The chirping of the new hatchlings brings the mother back to the nest and she carries them, eight to ten at a time, in her mouth down to the water. The hatchlings form pods and remain close to the mother for about one year or more. She aggressively protects them from all predators, particularly large dominant male alligators.
- The American alligator is considered a “keystone species” in some habitats, such as the Florida Everglades, because of its vital role in the ecosystem. In the Everglades, alligators modify the habitat by creating “alligator holes” which they excavate from mud and peat in the substrate using both the snout and tail. These water-filled holes provide refuge for other animals such as fish during dry periods and also provide foraging sites for wading birds, turtles and snakes. In addition, alligator nests provide elevated areas for the nests of other reptiles and are sites for germination of plants less tolerant of flooding.
- Alligators and crocodiles have small, sensory pits dotted around the upper and lower jaws. These are capable of detecting small pressure changes in water and assist in locating and capturing prey.
- This species hibernates during winter in burrows or dens that they dig, but occasionally emerge during brief spells of warmer weather.
- The gender of hatchling alligators is determined by the temperature during incubation. Males are produced in warmer parts of the nest and females in cooler areas. This tendency is common among many reptile species.
- American alligators are thought to live 30 to 40 years in the wild.
- Adults can stay submerged for several hours if not actively swimming or hunting. If active, submergence is limited to about 20 minutes.
- As of May 2006, there have been 19 confirmed fatalities caused by American alligators in the State of Florida since records began in 1948.

Sources

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