

Alligators A to Z

One of the most fascinating elements of a trip to the Louisiana coast is the chance to see alligators up close. Visitors can spot these reptiles during swamp tours, kayaking expeditions through bayous, stops at national parks and wildlife refuges ... or even just driving down the highway. Here's some basic information about this curious species:

Alligator mississippiensis: The scientific name of the alligator found in the United States. The common name is "American alligator."



Bellowing: During mating season (in April and May), groups of gators will call to each other for a few minutes a few times each day, usually shortly after sunrise.

Crocodile: This is a completely different species, and one not found in Louisiana. The only place where both alligators and crocodiles can be found is Florida.

Death roll: Alligators consume smaller prey in a single bite. For larger prey, they bite and then thrash about to tear off more manageable sized pieces. In order to complete this "death roll," the alligator must have a fully functional tail.

El lagarto: A Spanish term meaning "the lizard," which was what Spanish explorers and settlers called alligators when they first saw them in Florida. It was Anglicized into "allagarter" and then "alligator."

Fresh water: Alligators thrive best in an array of fresh-water habitats, including ponds, rivers and swamps. A large number also live in intermediate and brackish water conditions, and some are even found in salt-water environments.

Gator hole: Alligators go through periods of dormancy called "brumation" – which is almost like hibernation – in cooler months. During this time, they create a depression along a waterway and live there as their bodies slow down.

Hatchling: This is what a baby gator is called. When it's being born, it uses its "egg tooth" to get out of its shell. When it emerges, it could be six to eight inches long, and it has yellow and black stripes.

Incubation: The female lays 35 to 50 eggs, which need about 65 days before hatchlings emerge.



Jaw: Muscles used to close the jaw are very powerful – they can easily crack a turtle's shell – but those used to open it are weak. This is why it's possible for humans to hold an alligator's jaw shut, or why the jaw can be secured shut with simple duct tape or rubber bands when authorities have to treat or transfer an animal.

Killers: Alligators have earned a reputation of being a threat but are generally *not* harmful to humans. In fact, they're quite shy. If a human approaches, they'll typically walk or swim away. If provoked, though, they will attack.

Length: An adult male American alligator can average 11 to 13 feet long, though some can reach 15 feet. The largest ever recorded was found in Louisiana and measured more than 19 feet. Adult female alligators average eight to nine feet in length but are capable of reaching lengths of 10 feet.



Million: The number of alligators that are thought to live in Louisiana today is one million, so it's considered the state with the highest gator population.

Nutria: These animals, along with muskrats, are a favorite food for alligators. These small mammals do a lot of damage to American wetlands, so gators are a big help in controlling their population.

Oligocene epoch: The time when alligators first appeared on earth, about 37 million years ago.

Predator: Because alligators have been known to take down deer, Florida panther and even black bears, they are known as the "apex predator" in the regions they inhabit.

Quick: In the water, alligators can swim fast. On land, however, their heavy bodies make them slower.

Respiration: Alligators have a long snout with upward-facing nostrils, which allow them to breathe while the rest of their body is submerged in the water.

Southeast: The region of the United States where alligators are found. They are found all over the states of Louisiana and Florida and in the southern parts of Alabama, Georgia and Mississippi. They're also at home in coastal North and South Carolina. In addition, gators have been spotted in parts of Arkansas, Oklahoma and Texas.

Two: The number of alligator species, the American alligator and the Chinese alligator. Several extinct species have been identified through fossil remains, but today alligators are native to only two countries, the United States and China.

Unsociable: Male alligators are solitary creatures that prefer to live on their own and which will defend their territory. Younger gators and females will live closer together, however.

Vegetation: What a female alligator uses to build her nest, as it provides the heat she needs to incubate her eggs. The gender of the babies is determined during the first 14 days by the temperature of the nest. If the temperature is 86 degrees or lower, the babies will be female; temperatures of 92 or higher yield male offspring. Temperatures in between will yield both genders.



Weight: An adult male American alligator can weigh 600 to 800 pounds, though some tip the scales at 1,000 pounds.

X-ray: Some x-rays have revealed whole, smaller alligators in the belly of a big gator, proving that these animals can easily swallow even large prey – and, as a general rule, are cannibalistic.

Young: The biggest threat to a baby gator is adults of the species, and mothers are very protective. This is unusual within the reptile family, as most other species do not provide this level of care and defense to their young.

Zoo: The Belgrade Zoo in Serbia is home to what is thought to be the oldest American alligator in captivity, a male named Muja. Stories report that he arrived there in 1937, making him 77 years old.

Special thanks to Rudy Sparks of St. Mary Parish and Tim Domangue of Greenwood Gator Farm in Terrebonne Parish for their assistance and expertise in compiling this information.