

Alligator

Alligator mississippiensis



What do visitors typically want to know about Alligators?

First, visitors want to see an alligator, and when they finally do see one, they are often surprised to see it basking in the sun. Some even ask if it's real. Alligators are primarily nocturnal, so that is when they will be most active.

Visitors also want to know how big an alligator is. A decent approximation of the size is to estimate, in inches, the length from nostrils to eyes. That length in inches is roughly the length of the gator in feet. One half of the gator's length is made up of its tail. Large male gators can reach 1,000 pounds.

Newly hatched gators are between 8-9 inches long and grow 9-10 inches per year until they are about five years old, when growth slows. Gators in the wild grow more slowly than those in captivity. Males are larger than females, which rarely exceed 10 feet in length. The largest gator recorded in Florida was 17'5". *Myth buster:* Gators in the wild do not grow a foot a year.

Wild gators may live to be 30-40 years old. Male and female gators look alike. The only clues to gender are if a gator is more than 10 feet long it is probably a male, and if a gator is guarding young alligators, it is a female.

Visitors also ask about alligator diet and feeding habits. Gators are nocturnal hunters, and feed primarily on fish. They also eat frogs, snails, turtles, snakes, birds, rac-



coons, otters, deer and other alligators. Gators have also been known to eat dead animals (carrion) and to store their catch for weeks before consuming it. Young gators live off the yolk sack for their first 2-3 days of life, and then feed on crayfish, snails and small insects.

Because alligators are cold blooded, they must rely on external temperatures to activate some systems. For example, heat from the sun is

needed to start digestion; when it's too cold, an alligator might starve with a full stomach because the food would rot inside its stomach.

A gator's optimum body temperature is 89° F. All feeding ceases when water temperatures are below 60° F, and they feed most often when temperatures are between 73° and 90°F. A healthy gator can go months without food.

Alligators have 70-80 hollow and conical-shaped, one-inch teeth that are continually replaced as old ones break or wear out. Their jaws are extremely strong with 2,000 pounds per square inch of crushing power, but they have weak opening power and once closed, they can be easily held shut.

Alligators can stay underwater for several hours if not actively swimming (then only for 20 minutes), and they cruise through the water at just over 1 m.p.h. In pursuit of prey, they can swim much faster for short distances. They also can leap out

of the water, but only where the water is deep enough for them to gain enough power and speed with their tail.

On land, an alligator can lumber dragging its tail, walk on its toes with the heels of hind feet and most of tail off the ground, pull itself through a muddy gator slide, and rapidly "sprint" in a straight line for short distances.

Despite their prehistoric ancestry, the alligator does communicate with

other alligators in often complex manners. Gators can hiss (a defensive warning), grunt, cough, growl and bellow. They also communicate using complex body postures and movements. *Myth buster:* Bellowing is not used exclusively in mating. It usually occurs in the spring, but it can happen any time. Gators may even bellow in response to sonic booms and thunder.

Gator Love Notes

- Gators begin breeding at about 8 to 10 years of age.
- Courting activities include snout touching, bellowing, coughing, back rubbing, circling, bubble blowing, and swimming together.



- Females make the nest of vegetation, sticks, leaves, and mud (a compost pile) in a sheltered spot near the water but above the high water mark.
- A female lays from 20 to 40 eggs that are incubated for 65 days. Heat for incubation comes from the rotting vegetation in the nest.
- On average, about half of the eggs hatch and only half of those young gators survive the first year. Only about one out of every 20 survives to become a breeding adult.
- Females guard the nest and then the young for up to two years.
- Sex of the young is determined by the temperature inside the nest: >90° becomes male, 85°< becomes female, 85°-90° can be either sex.
- Hatching occurs from mid August to early September.
- Young make chirping noises from inside the egg which prompts the female to dig open the nest so the young can get to water.