

Modern alligators are the remnants of an old and strange lineage dating back 205 million years ago to the crocodylomorpha. By comparison, American alligators appeared about 85 million years ago. They belong to a diverse and distinct group of creatures that goes back to the Triassic era. Alligators inhabit swamps, tidal marshes, creeks, rivers, canals, ponds, lakes, reservoirs, and Winding Cypress. They don't have the glands to excrete salt from their bodies, so they can't swim in saltwater habitats like mangrove swamps, but they can hunt there. The largest alligator ever measured was 15 feet, nine inches long and weighed 1,011.5 pounds. Alligators don't hibernate, but they do go through a dormancy period during colder weather called brumation: before going dormant, they use their feet and snouts to dig out what's known as a "gator hole," a depression or tunnel in the mud. Gator holes can be up to 65 feet long, and they protect the alligators when it's too hot or cold for comfort. During this brumation period, which can last up to 5 months, their heart rates and metabolism slow way down. They continue to breathe through their snouts, which they stick slightly out of the water. Alligators stop feeding when the ambient temperature drops below about 70° F and they become dormant below 55° F, according to the Florida Fish & Wildlife Management Commission. During the winter, alligators in southern Florida come out to bask on shorelines in the sun on most days.

Alligators are built for speed, not endurance. They can run up to 35 mph—faster than most humans—but they are sprinters and can't keep up that pace for long. In the water, they can lunge at up to 30 mph. They can also swim very fast by using their powerful tails to propel them forward.

A cool fact about alligators is that the sex of them is determined not by DNA but, rather, by climate. In most animals, offspring genders are determined by sex chromosomes at the time of conception. Alligators and other crocodylian species, as well as some turtles and lizards, do not have sex chromosomes. Instead, the sex of the young is determined by the temperature at which the eggs incubate during a critical period of development.

To hypothesize if a gator is male or female visually, you can use the following hints. If it measures 10 feet or more, it's a male. Females don't grow that long. If it's less than 9 feet in length, it could be either a male or a female. If there are small, newly born alligators around an adult, it is a female. The babies will stay near their mother for up to a year and she will protect them. A male gator could eat them, even if he's the father, so the mother usually won't let him anywhere near the babies. Other than that, leave the absolute determination to the scientists!

Alligators have about 75 teeth in their mouths at any one time, but as the teeth wear down or break off, they are replaced. As a result, many can have about 3,000 teeth over the course of their lives. According to some sources, alligators can bite with a force of nearly 3,000 pounds per inch, making their bite among the most powerful in the world. On several occasions, they have been spotted in Winding Cypress eating turtles like a Big Mac.

Alligators' eyes are on the top of their heads, making it easy for them to lie almost entirely submerged in water and still see their prey. Alligators, like cats, also have a structure in the back of their eyes that reflects light to improve night vision. If you catch an alligator's eyes with a flashlight, they will glow red. You can also tell how big an alligator is by the distance between its eyes: the greater the distance, the longer the alligator is. As mating season is upon us, you are likely to see (and hear) them this month.

Mating season begins in early April, and mating occurs in May or June. Adult alligators tend to be unsocial creatures; however, they do engage in complex mating rituals. Their search begins by announcing their presence with a low bellowing sound to attract their mate. It is so loud that they are titled the "loudest reptiles in the world." Males typically slap the water with their jaws and lift their tails high, causing vibrations throughout the water. This is called a "water dance." Like most animals, alligators use scents as well, releasing an odor from their musk glands. When an alligator finds their potential mate, they initiate direct courtship by rubbing and pressing each other's snouts and backs. This behavior is particularly important, as it shows a sort of contest of strength while proving they're better than other potential suitors. This "contest" is used to win over the female alligator and stimulate further courtship. [Watch a fascinating video of this ritual here.](#) While the typical courtship routine may last hours, copulation is very short (usually less than 30 seconds). Once the females have mated several times for the season, they begin to build a nest from mud, plants and sticks to lay their eggs. The typical alligator lays between 20 to 50 eggs. After the hard-shelled eggs are laid, the mother alligator will cover them with more mud, sticks, and plants and wait for their arrival during their 65-day incubation period.

Be vigilant in the neighborhood these days. Neighbor's Ring cameras have recorded them walking around our houses lately.

Fast Facts

Common Name: Alligator

Scientific Name: Alligatoridae

Average Lifetime in the Wild: 50 years

Average Lifetime in Captivity: 60 to 80 years

Current Population: American alligator, 750,000 to 1,060,000 mature individuals; Chinese alligator, 68 to 86 mature individuals

