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ALLIGATOR FACT SHEET



KINGDOM:
Animalia

PHYLUM:
Chordata

CLASS:
Reptilia

ORDER:
Crocodylia

FAMILY:
Alligatoridae

GENUS:
Alligator

SPECIES:
Alligator
mississippiensis,
Alligator sinensis

An alligator is a crocodylian in the genus

Alligator of the family Alligatoridae. There are two living alligator species: the American Alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*) and the Chinese Alligator (*Alligator sinensis*). They are closely related to crocodiles.

DESCRIPTION:

Alligators are characterized by a broader snout and eyes more dorsally located than their crocodile cousins. Both living species also tend to be darker in color, often nearly black (although the Chinese alligator has some light patterning.) Also, in alligators only the upper teeth can be seen with the jaws closed (in contrast to true crocodiles, in which upper and lower teeth can be seen), though many individuals bear jaw deformities which complicate this means of identification.

HABITAT:

There are only two countries on earth that have alligators: the United States and China. The Chinese alligator is endangered and lives only in the Yangtze River valley. The American Alligator is found in the United States from the Carolinas to Florida and along the Gulf Coast. The majority of American Alligators inhabit Florida and Louisiana. In Florida alone there are an estimated more than 1 million alligators. The United States is the only nation on earth to have both alligators and crocodiles. American Alligators live in freshwater environments, such as ponds, marshes, wetlands, rivers, and swamps. In China, they live only along the fresh water of the Yangtze River.

BEHAVIOR:

Alligators are solitary, territorial animals. The largest of the species (both males and females) will defend prime territory; smaller alligators have a higher tolerance of other alligators within a similar size class.

Although alligators have heavy bodies and slow metabolisms, they are capable of short bursts of speed that can exceed 30 miles per hour. Alligators' main prey are smaller animals that they can kill and eat with a single bite. Alligators may kill larger prey by grabbing it and dragging it in the water to drown. Alligators consume food that cannot be eaten in one bite by allowing it to rot or by biting and then spinning or convulsing wildly until bite size pieces are torn off. This is referred to as the "death roll."

DIET:

Alligators are opportunistic feeders, eating almost anything they can catch. When they are young they eat fish, insects, snails, and crustaceans. As they grow they take progressively larger prey items, including: larger fish such as gar, turtles, various mammals, birds, and other reptiles, including smaller alligators. They will even consume carrion if they are sufficiently hungry. As humans encroach onto to their habitat, attacks on humans are not unknown, but are few and far between.

REPRODUCTION:

Alligators are seasonal breeders. The mating season is in spring when the water warms. The female builds a nest of vegetation that rots, incubating the eggs. The mother will defend the nest from predators and will assist the babies to water once they hatch. She will provide protection to the young for about a year if they remain in the area.

FACTS:

There are two species—a large type found in the United States and a small type found in China. Alligators differ from crocodiles in several ways. They have broader, blunter snouts, which give their heads a triangular appearance; also, the lower fourth tooth does not protrude when the mouth is closed, as it does in the crocodile.

The American alligator, *Alligator mississippiensis*, is found in swamps and sluggish streams from North Carolina to Florida and along the Gulf Coast. When young, it is dark brown or black with yellow transverse bands. The bands fade as the animal grows, and the adult is black.

Males commonly reach a length of 9 ft (2.7 m) and a weight of 250 lbs (110 kg); females are smaller. Males 18 ft (5.4 m) long were once fairly common, but intensive hunting for alligator leather eliminated larger individuals (a specimen over 10 ft/3 m long is now unusual) and threatened the species as a whole.

The wild American alligator is now protected by law, but it is also inhumanely raised on farms for commercial uses.

Alligators spend the day floating just below the surface of the water or resting on the bank, lying in holes in hot weather. They hunt by night, in the water and on the bank. Young alligators feed on water insects, crustaceans, frogs, and fish; as they grow they catch proportionally larger animals. Large alligators may occasionally capture deer and cows as they come to drink; they do not commonly attack humans.

Alligators hibernate from October to March. In summer the female builds a nest of rotting vegetation on the bank and deposits in it 20 to 70 eggs, which she guards for 9 to 10 weeks until they hatch.

The Chinese alligator, *A. sinensis*, which grows to about 6 ft (1.8 m) long, is found in the Chang (Yangtze) River valley near Shanghai. This species is nearly extinct.

Caimans are similar, but distinct members of the Alligatoridae family found in Central and South America. There are several species, classified in three genera. The largest grow up to 15 ft (4.8 m) long. Unlike alligators, caimans have bony overlapping scales on their bellies. Baby caimans are often sold in the United States as baby alligators. Caimans and alligators are wild animals and should not be kept as pets for human amusement.

Alligators and caimans are classified in the phylum Chordata, subphylum Vertebrata, class Reptilia, order Crocrodilia, family Alligatoridae.