

# AMERICAN ALLIGATOR FACT SHEET

American alligators inhabit the southeastern United States. Once a federally listed endangered species, American alligators have recovered in many areas. The species is still federally listed as threatened because it looks like the American crocodile, which is endangered.

## HABITAT

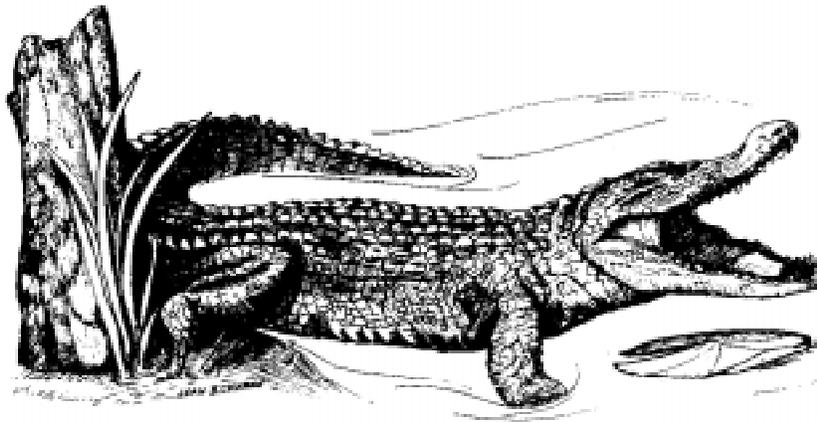
Although they are primarily freshwater animals, alligators will venture into brackish salt water. Alligators live in swampy areas, rivers, streams, lakes and ponds. On the Savannah River Site, alligators inhabit the Savannah River, its swamp and tributaries, and Par Pond and other reservoirs on the site.

## BREEDING

Alligators are active year around, but they are most active in the warmer months in Georgia and South Carolina. With the start of their breeding season in May, males “bellow” to females and other males in the area. By June, pairs have mated, and females begin building mound nests out of marsh reeds or other vegetation.

Sometime during late June or early July, females lay be-

tween 20 and 60 eggs. The hard-shelled, white eggs are about 3 inches long and resemble goose eggs. The mother defends the nest against predators throughout the incubation period, about 65 days. When the eggs are ready to hatch, the mother alligator digs into the nest mound, opens any eggs that have not hatched and carries the young down to the water. Females sometimes aggressively defend their young for more than a year.



## FEEDING

Alligators are opportunistic feeders; adults eat fish, turtles, wading birds, snakes, frogs and small mammals they find near the shoreline of their habitat. Young alligators feed on small fish and aquatic insects, but in turn, they can be food for raccoons, crabs, various types of wading birds and even fish.

Mother alligators that are killed or removed from the area cannot defend their nests or young, and the hatchlings often are doomed. If the young escape

predation and can find enough food, they may grow between 3 and 8 inches in length yearly. When they reach lengths of about 6 feet, they are considered adults.

## RESEARCH

Scientists at the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory have studied American alligators on the Savannah River Site for more than 25 years. They have recorded population sizes,

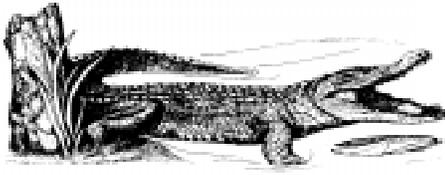
distribution and trends; animal sizes, sexes, activity periods, growth rates and reproductive efforts; diet, nutrition and energetics; responses to thermal effluent from

cooling reservoirs; uptake of radionuclides; genetic patterns and the conservation of the species.

## DID YOU KNOW?

- The largest recorded American alligator was 19 feet in length.
- Alligators and their relatives are the last of the living reptiles that were closely related to dinosaurs.
- Alligators and crocodiles are related. But alligators have rounded snouts; most crocodile species have longer, pointed

# HOW YOU CAN SAFELY OBSERVE ALLIGATORS



snouts. Also, crocodiles occur only in tropical and subtropical areas (only south Florida in the United States). Alligators, on the other hand, live in somewhat colder climates.

☐ Alligators have a strong homing instinct and sometimes will protect their “territory” from other alligators.

## **RANGE**

On the Atlantic Coast, they occur from Florida to coastal North Carolina. Alligators are also found in the Upper Coastal Plain, which includes the Central Savannah River Area of Georgia and South Carolina. In South Carolina, alligators have been recorded to reach lengths of more than 13 feet.

## **1. DON'T FEED THE ALLIGATORS.**

This is a most important rule! Providing food for these wild animals not only makes them bolder and encourages them to seek out people, it also alters their natural diet in an unhealthy way.

## **2. KEEP YOUR DISTANCE.**

Although they may look slow and awkward, these animals are extremely powerful and can move with a startling burst of speed on land over short distances. A safe distance from an adult alligator is about 60 feet.

## **3. NEVER DISTURB NESTS OR SMALL ALLIGATORS.**

Some female alligators protect their young and may become aggressive if provoked. A baby alligator should never be captured, even if the mother is not visible. She may be watching you and decide to take action to protect her baby.

## **4. KEEP YOUR PETS AND CHILDREN AWAY FROM ALLIGATORS.**

Large alligators do not recognize the difference between domestic pets and wild food sources. When they are hungry, alligators act on their hunting instinct and might attempt to feed on your house pet if given the opportunity.

## **5. DON'T SWIM IN AREAS THAT ARE KNOWN ALLIGATOR HABITATS.**

Always be careful around water. Splashing can attract alligators that think a prey animal is injured. They may act on instinct and attack.

Or, a protective female may believe her young or eggs are threatened and take defensive action. Be cautious when fishing in waters with alligators, as some will not hesitate to grab a hooked fish or eat the fish on a stringer.

## **ADVICE TO REMEMBER**

“Alligators are fascinating creatures and should by all means be enjoyed as part of the natural beauty of our region. But please remember that they are wild animals and should be respected as such. Once they become too familiar with people, they lose their fear of humans, necessitating their removal from the area for the safety of everyone concerned. A few precautions on our part can help both humans and alligators co-exist safely.”

**--Dr. J. Whitfield Gibbons**  
*SREL senior ecologist*