[Template:Other uses](/wiki/Template:Other_uses" \o "Template:Other uses) [Template:Pp-semi-vandalism](/wiki/Template:Pp-semi-vandalism) [Template:Italic title](/wiki/Template:Italic_title)[Template:Automatic taxobox](/wiki/Template:Automatic_taxobox)

An **alligator** is a [crocodilian](/wiki/Crocodilia) in the [genus](/wiki/Genus) *Alligator* of the family [Alligatoridae](/wiki/Alligatoridae). The two [living](/wiki/Extant_taxon) [species](/wiki/Species) are the [American alligator](/wiki/American_alligator) (*A. mississippiensis*) and the [Chinese alligator](/wiki/Chinese_alligator) (*A. sinensis*). In addition, several extinct species of alligator are known from fossil remains. Alligators first appeared during the [Paleocene](/wiki/Paleocene) epoch about 37 million years ago.<ref name = PBDB>[Template:Cite web](/wiki/Template:Cite_web)</ref>

The name "alligator" is probably an [anglicized](/wiki/Anglicization) form of [*Template:Lang*](/wiki/Template:Lang), the Spanish term for "the lizard", which early Spanish explorers and settlers in [Florida](/wiki/Florida) called the alligator. Later English spellings of the name included *allagarta* and *alagarto*.[[1]](#cite_note-1)

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## Description[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=1)]

An average adult American alligator's weight and length is [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) and [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert), but they sometimes grow to [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) long and weigh over [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert).[[2]](#cite_note-2) The largest ever recorded, found in Louisiana, measured [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert).[[3]](#cite_note-3) The Chinese alligator is smaller, rarely exceeding [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert) in length. In addition, it weighs considerably less, with males rarely over [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert).

No average lifespan for an alligator has been measured.[[4]](#cite_note-4) In 1937, an adult specimen was brought to the [Belgrade Zoo](/wiki/Belgrade_Zoo) in [Serbia](/wiki/Serbia) from [Germany](/wiki/Germany). It is now at least 80 years old.[[5]](#cite_note-5) Although no valid records exist about its date of birth, this alligator, officially named [Muja](/wiki/Muja_(alligator)), is considered the oldest alligator living in captivity.[[6]](#cite_note-6)

## Habitat[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=2)]

[Template:Multiple image](/wiki/Template:Multiple_image) Alligators are native only to the [United States](/wiki/United_States) and [China](/wiki/China).[Template:Citation needed](/wiki/Template:Citation_needed)

American alligators are found in the [southeast United States](/wiki/Southeast_United_States): all of [Florida](/wiki/Florida) and [Louisiana](/wiki/Louisiana), the southern parts of [Georgia](/wiki/Georgia_(US_state)), [Alabama](/wiki/Alabama), and [Mississippi](/wiki/Mississippi), coastal [South](/wiki/South_Carolina) and [North Carolina](/wiki/North_Carolina), [East Texas](/wiki/East_Texas), the southeast corner of [Oklahoma](/wiki/Oklahoma), and the southern tip of [Arkansas](/wiki/Arkansas). According to the 2005 Scholastic Book of World Records, Louisiana has the largest alligator population.[[7]](#cite_note-7) The majority of American alligators inhabit Florida and Louisiana, with over a million alligators in each state. Southern Florida is the only place where both alligators and [crocodiles](/wiki/Crocodile) live side by side.[[8]](#cite_note-8)[[9]](#cite_note-9) American alligators live in [freshwater](/wiki/Freshwater) environments, such as ponds, [marshes](/wiki/Marsh), [wetlands](/wiki/Wetland), rivers, lakes, and [swamps](/wiki/Swamp), as well as in brackish environments.[[10]](#cite_note-10) When they construct alligator holes in the wetlands, they increase plant diversity and provide habitat for other animals during droughts.[[11]](#cite_note-11) They are, therefore, considered an important species for maintaining ecological diversity in wetlands.[[12]](#cite_note-12) Further west, in Louisiana, heavy grazing by [coypu](/wiki/Coypu) and [muskrat](/wiki/Muskrat) are causing severe damage to coastal wetlands. Large alligators feed extensively on coypu, and provide a vital ecological service by reducing coypu numbers.[[13]](#cite_note-13) The Chinese alligator currently is found only in the [Yangtze River](/wiki/Yangtze_River) valley[Template:Citation needed](/wiki/Template:Citation_needed) and is extremely endangered, with only a few dozen believed to be left in the wild. Indeed, far more Chinese alligators live in zoos around the world than can be found in the wild. Rockefeller Wildlife Refuge in southern Louisiana has several in captivity in an attempt to preserve the species. [Miami MetroZoo](/wiki/Zoo_Miami) in Florida also has a breeding pair of Chinese alligators.

## Behavior[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=3)]

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Large male alligators are [solitary](/wiki/Wikt:solitary) [territorial](/wiki/Territory_(animal)) animals. Smaller alligators can often be found in large numbers close to each other. The largest of the species (both males and females) defend prime territory; smaller alligators have a higher tolerance for other alligators within a similar size class.

Alligators move on land by two forms of locomotion referred to as "sprawl" and "high walk". The sprawl is a forward movement with the belly making contact with the ground and is used to transition to "high walk" or to slither over wet substrate into water. The high walk is an up on four limbs forward motion used for overland travel with the belly well up from the ground.[[14]](#cite_note-14) Alligators have also been observed to rise up and balance on their hind legs and semi step forward as part of a forward or upward lunge. However they can not walk on their hind legs for long distances.[[15]](#cite_note-15)[[16]](#cite_note-16)[[17]](#cite_note-17) Although the alligator has a heavy body and a slow [metabolism](/wiki/Metabolism), it is capable of short bursts of speed, especially in very short lunges. Alligators' main prey are smaller animals they can kill and eat with a single bite. They may kill larger prey by grabbing it and dragging it into the water to drown. Alligators consume food that can not be eaten in one bite by allowing it to rot, or by biting and then spinning or convulsing wildly until bite-sized chunks are torn off. This is referred to as a "death roll". Critical to the alligator's ability to initiate a death roll, the tail must flex to a significant angle relative to its body. An alligator with an immobilized tail cannot perform a death roll.[[18]](#cite_note-18) Most of the muscle in an alligator's jaw evolved to bite and grip prey. The muscles that close the jaws are exceptionally powerful, but the muscles for opening their jaws are comparatively weak. As a result, an adult human can hold an alligator's jaws shut bare-handed. It is common today to use several wraps of [duct tape](/wiki/Duct_tape) to prevent an adult alligator from opening its jaws when being handled or transported.[[19]](#cite_note-19) Alligators are generally timid towards humans and tend to walk or swim away if one approaches. This has led some people to the practice of approaching alligators and their nests in a manner that may provoke the animals into attacking. In Florida, feeding wild alligators at any time is illegal. If fed, the alligators will eventually lose their fear of humans and will learn to associate humans with food, thereby becoming both a greater danger to people, and at greater risk from them.[[20]](#cite_note-20)

## Diet[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=4)]

The type of food eaten by alligators depends upon their age and size. When young, alligators eat fish, insects, [snails](/wiki/Snail), [crustaceans](/wiki/Crustacean), and [worms](/wiki/Worm). As they mature, progressively larger prey is taken, including larger fish such as [gar](/wiki/Gar), turtles, and various mammals, particularly coypu and muskrat,[[10]](#cite_note-10) as well as birds, deer, and other reptiles.[[21]](#cite_note-21)[[22]](#cite_note-22) Their stomachs also often contain [gizzard stones](/wiki/Gastrolith). They will even consume [carrion](/wiki/Carrion) if they are sufficiently hungry. In some cases, larger alligators are known to ambush dogs, [Florida panthers](/wiki/Florida_panther) and [black bears](/wiki/American_Black_Bear), making it the [apex predator](/wiki/Apex_predator) throughout its distribution. In this role as a top predator, it may determine the abundance of prey species, including turtles and [coypu](/wiki/Coypu).[[23]](#cite_note-23)[[24]](#cite_note-24) As humans encroach into their habitat, attacks are few but not unknown. Alligators, [unlike the large crocodiles](/wiki/Differences_between_crocodiles_and_alligators), do not immediately regard a human upon encounter as prey, but may still attack in self-defense if provoked.

## Reproduction[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=5)]

[Template:Multiple image](/wiki/Template:Multiple_image)

Alligators generally mature at a length of [Template:Convert](/wiki/Template:Convert). The mating season is in late spring. In April and May, alligators form so-called "bellowing choruses". Large groups of animals bellow together for a few minutes a few times a day, usually one to three hours after sunrise. The bellows of male American alligators are accompanied by powerful blasts of [infrasound](/wiki/Infrasound).[[25]](#cite_note-25) Another form of male display is a loud head-slap.[[26]](#cite_note-26) Recently, on spring nights alligators were found to gather in large numbers for group courtship, the so-called "alligator dances".[[27]](#cite_note-27) In summer, the female builds a nest of vegetation where the decomposition of the vegetation provides the heat needed to incubate the eggs. The sex of the offspring is [determined by the temperature](/wiki/Temperature-dependent_sex_determination) in the nest and is fixed within seven to 21 days of the start of incubation. Incubation temperatures of 86 °F (30 °C) or lower produce a clutch of females; those of 93 °F (34 °C) or higher produce entirely males. Nests constructed on leaves are hotter than those constructed on wet marsh, so the former tend to produce males and the latter, females. The baby alligator's [egg tooth](/wiki/Egg_tooth) helps it get out of its egg during hatching time. The natural sex ratio at hatching is five females to one male. Females hatched from eggs incubated at 86 °F weigh significantly more than males hatched from eggs incubated at 93 °F.[[28]](#cite_note-28) The mother defends the nest from predators and assists the hatchlings to water. She will provide protection to the young for about a year if they remain in the area. The largest threat to the young are adult alligators. Predation by adults on young can account for a mortality rate of up to 50% in the first year. In the past, immediately following the outlawing of alligator [hunting](/wiki/Hunting), populations rebounded quickly due to the suppressed number of adults preying upon juveniles, increasing survival among the young alligators.

## Anatomy[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=6)]

[thumb|right|A rare albino alligator swimming](/wiki/File:Albino_Alligator_in_Water.jpg) Alligators, much like birds, have been shown to exhibit unidirectional movement of air through their lungs.[[29]](#cite_note-29) Most other [amniotes](/wiki/Amniote) are believed to exhibit bidirectional, or tidal breathing. For a tidal breathing animal, such as a mammal, air flows into and out of the lungs through branching [bronchi](/wiki/Bronchi) which terminate in small dead-end chambers called [alveoli](/wiki/Alveoli). As the alveoli represent dead-ends to flow, the inspired air must move back out the same way it came in. In contrast, air in alligator lungs makes a circuit, moving in only one direction through the [parabronchi](/wiki/Parabronchi). The air first enters the outer branch, moves through the parabronchi, and exits the lung through the inner branch. Extensive vasculature around the parabronchi are where oxygen exchange takes place.[[30]](#cite_note-30) They have muscular, flat tails that propel them while swimming.

The two kinds of white alligators are [albino](/wiki/Albino) and [leucistic](/wiki/Leucism). These alligators are practically impossible to find in the wild. They could survive only in captivity and are few in number.[[31]](#cite_note-31)[[32]](#cite_note-32) The [Aquarium of the Americas](/wiki/Aquarium_of_the_Americas) in [New Orleans](/wiki/New_Orleans) has leucistic alligators found in a Louisiana swamp in 1987.[[32]](#cite_note-32)

## Human uses[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=7)]

[Template:Main](/wiki/Template:Main) Alligators are raised commercially for their meat and skin, which is used for bags and shoes. They also provide economic benefits through the ecotourism industry. Visitors may take swamp tours, in which alligators are a feature. Their most important economic benefit to humans may be the control of [coypu](/wiki/Coypu) and [muskrats](/wiki/Muskrat).[[33]](#cite_note-33) Louisiana spends millions of dollars of bounty money to control coypu.[Template:Citation needed](/wiki/Template:Citation_needed) This service is provided by alligators.

[Alligator meat](/wiki/Alligator_meat) is also consumed by humans.[[34]](#cite_note-34)[[35]](#cite_note-35) The [Archbishop of New Orleans](/wiki/Archbishop_of_New_Orleans) ruled in 2010 that for purposes of Catholic church discipline in relation to [abstention from meat](/wiki/Fasting), the flesh of the alligator is characterised as fish.[[36]](#cite_note-36)

## Gallery of extant species[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=8)]

<gallery widths="215px" heights="200px"> File:AmericanAlligator.JPG|[American alligator](/wiki/American_alligator) (*A. mississippiensis*) File:ChineseAlligator.jpg|[Chinese alligator](/wiki/Chinese_alligator) (*A. sinensis*) </gallery>

## See also[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=9)]

[Template:Portal](/wiki/Template:Portal)

* [American crocodile](/wiki/American_crocodile)
* [Caiman](/wiki/Caiman)
* [List of fatal alligator attacks in the United States by decade](/wiki/List_of_fatal_alligator_attacks_in_the_United_States_by_decade)
* [Alligator meat](/wiki/Alligator_meat)
* [Alligator farm](/wiki/Alligator_farm)

## References[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=10)]

[Template:Reflist](/wiki/Template:Reflist)

## External links[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=11)]

[Template:Commons category](/wiki/Template:Commons_category)

* [Crocodilian Online](http://www.crocodilian.com)
* [Photo exhibit on alligators in Florida](http://www.floridamemory.com/PhotographicCollection/photo_exhibits/alligators/); made available by the [State Archives of Florida](/wiki/State_Archives_of_Florida)
* [Interview Seminole alligator wrestler](http://floridamemory.com/audio/podcast-single.php?id=12); made available for public use by the State Archives of Florida

[Template:Wiktionary-inline](/wiki/Template:Wiktionary-inline)

[Template:Crocodilia](/wiki/Template:Crocodilia) [Template:Crocs](/wiki/Template:Crocs)

[Category:Alligatoridae](/wiki/Category:Alligatoridae) [Category:Meat](/wiki/Category:Meat) [Category:Extant Oligocene first appearances](/wiki/Category:Extant_Oligocene_first_appearances)