

American Alligators

American alligators are large reptiles with sharp teeth and a long tail. They are found in the Southeast United States from North Carolina to Texas. They mostly live in freshwater habitats like ponds and swamps. As reptiles they have scaly skin, breathe air with lungs, lay eggs and are cold blooded. Cold blooded animals are the same temperature inside their body as their environment (for example, when it's hot outside, their body is hot inside).

Alligators are carnivores (meat eaters). As hatchlings and juveniles, they eat small animals such as fish, snails, crayfish, frogs and birds. As adults, they eat fish, birds, turtles, frogs, mammals (such as rabbits and racoons) and even young alligators.

Life Cycle

The life cycle of an alligator is egg, hatchling, juvenile and adult.

Egg: Alligators hatch from eggs. Females create large nests (10 feet wide) and lay 30-50 leathery eggs in the summer. Alligator moms cover the eggs with sticks and dirt and then guard them to keep them safe. The temperature in the environment is what determines if the alligators will be born boys or girls. If the temperature of the nest is hot, there will be more boys. If the temperature is cooler, there will be more girls.

Hatchling: After about 65 days, hatchlings make chirping noises inside the egg and this alerts the mother to uncover the eggs. When they hatch they are 6-8 inches long. They live in groups

called pods with their mom for protection. They will chirp when danger is near and the mothers will allow them to jump in their mouth or on their back for protection. Hatchlings have yellow stripes on their bodies to help them hide in the grasses of the pond or swamp. This is great camouflage.

Juvenile: Alligators become juveniles when they leave their mother and grow about 4 feet. They typically grow 8-12 inches a year. As they become juveniles, the yellow stripes start to fade away to just a dark brown/black color so they can better blend in with the water.

Adult: Alligators reach adulthood at about 6 feet. As adults, females stay in the same area and males will travel larger distances. The average size for an American Alligator is 12 feet and 1000 pounds. They can live 30-50 years.

Problems

Starting in the 1940s, a chemical called DDT was used by farmers to keep pests off of their crops. Over time, scientists discovered that DDT was the reason there were less alligators. When alligators ate their prey, they were also eating DDT. The DDT in the mother's bodies made the eggs weak. When the females laid eggs, many did not survive.

Alligator populations decreased a lot because of DDT. After scientists figured out the problem, farmers were not allowed to use DDT in their fields. This started in 1972. It took several years, but now alligator populations are doing well again.