



## My Drift

**Title: American Alligator**

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**American alligators are found in the southeast United States: all of Florida and Louisiana, the southern parts of Georgia, Alabama, Arkansas, and Mississippi, coastal South and North Carolina, East Texas, and the southeast corner of Oklahoma.**



**American Alligator Range**

What state do you think has the most Alligators? Did you say, “Florida?” 9 out of 10 people surveyed said Florida. Well, you would be wrong. Louisiana has the largest population with more than 2 million American Alligators. There are also over 300,000 alligators on alligator farms in Louisiana. Florida is second with about 1.3 million alligators. The other eight (8) states combined have around 2.7 million alligators for a grand total of 5 million in the United States. Plus, there are about 1,000 American Crocodiles living in Southern Florida. This is one of the few places in the world where both alligators and crocodiles coexist in the same area.



**American Alligator**



**American Crocodile**

**Comparison**

Male – 500 to 600 pounds  
 Female – 200 to 300 pounds  
 Male – 10 to 12 feet  
 Female – 7 to 8 feet  
 In water – 20 mph  
 On land – 10 mph (Short distance)  
 Olive brown or black or dark gray  
 More rounded and U-shaped  
 74 to 80  
 30 to 50 years  
 Freshwater – Slow moving rivers, wetlands, swamps, marshes and lakes

**Weight**  
  
**Length**  
  
**Speed**  
  
**Skin Color**  
**Snout**  
**Teeth**  
**Lifespan**  
**Habitat**

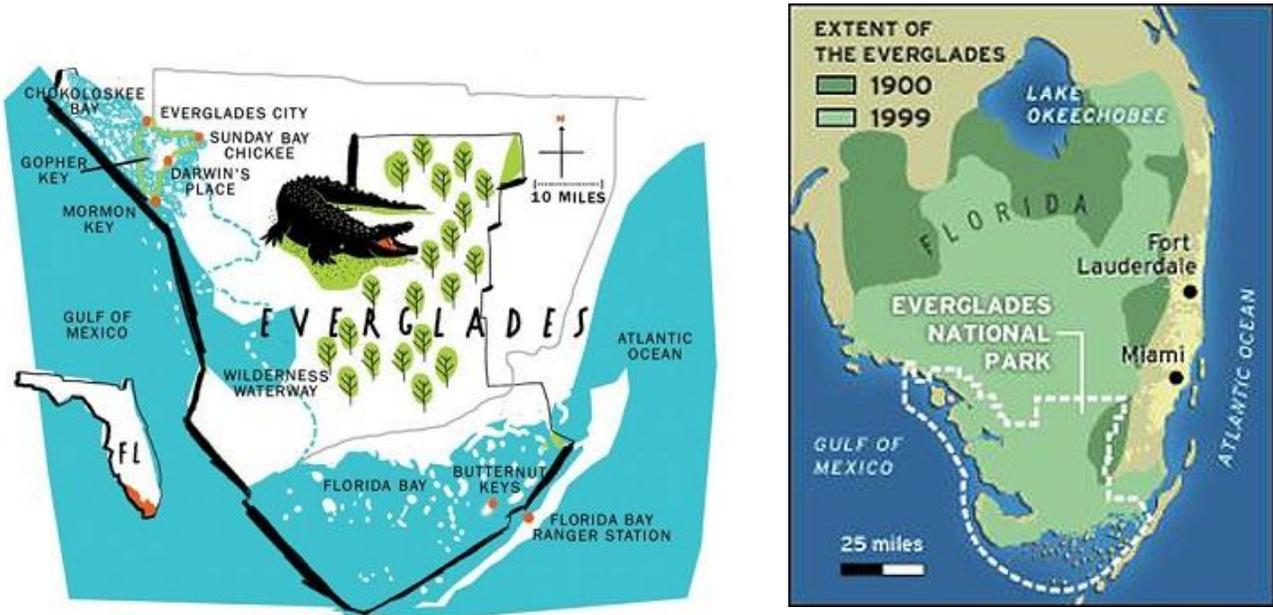
Male – 900 to 1100 pounds  
 Female – 300 to 400 pounds  
 Male – 13 to 15 feet  
 Female – 8 to 10 feet  
 In water – 20 mph  
 On land – 10 mph (Short distance)  
 Lighter gray or silver  
 More pointed and V-shaped  
 66 to 68  
 50 to 70 years  
 Coastal brackish or saltwater areas - mangrove swamps

**Places with the most alligators:**

**The Everglades or Pa-hay-okee (Original name given by the Seminole Indians)**

The Everglades is a natural region of tropical wetlands in the southern portion of Florida, comprising the southern half of a large drainage basin ecozone. The system begins near Orlando with the Kissimmee River, which discharges into the vast but shallow Lake Okeechobee. Water leaving the lake in the wet season forms a slow-

moving river 60 miles wide and over 100 miles long, flowing southward across a limestone shelf to Florida Bay at the southern end of the state. The Everglades is made up of a system of interdependent ecosystems that include sawgrass marshes, cypress swamps, mangrove forests, tropical hardwood hammocks, pine rockland, and the marine environment of Florida Bay.

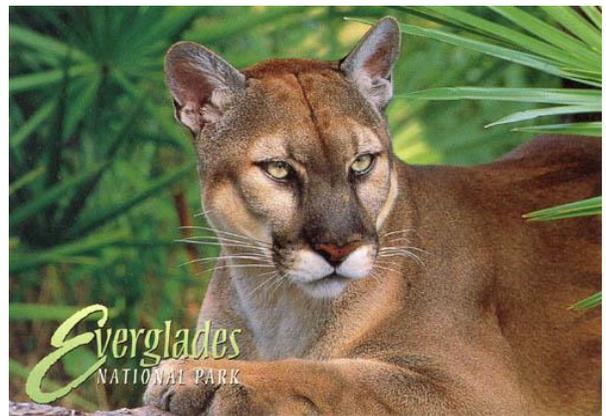


The area recognized as the Everglades, prior to drainage, was a web of marshes and prairies 4,000 square miles in size. After humans drained much of the Everglades, its current size is only 734 square miles. Finally, the government stepped in and saved the Everglades by creating the Everglades National Park.



This park is the largest tropical wilderness of any kind east of the Mississippi River, and is visited on average by 1 million people each year. It is the third-largest national park in the lower 48 states after Death Valley and Yellowstone. Most national parks preserve unique geographic features; The Everglades National Park was the first created to protect a fragile ecosystem.

The Everglades National Park is a great place to go see alligators and other wildlife plus some great scenery. (See pictures on next page)



Well, the Everglades is big but the swamp in Louisiana is much bigger! There are also many more alligators and a lot more snakes.

The Atchafalaya Basin or Swamp is the largest wetland and swamp in the United States. Located in south central Louisiana, it is a combination of wetlands and river delta area where the Atchafalaya River and the Gulf of Mexico converge. The river stretches from near Simmesport in the north through parts of eight parishes to the Morgan City southern area.



The Atchafalaya is different among Louisiana basins because it has a growing delta system with wetlands that are almost stable. The basin contains about 70% forest habitat and about 30% marsh and open water. It contains the largest contiguous block of forested wetlands remaining (about 35%) in the lower Mississippi River valley and the largest block of floodplain forest in the United States. Best known for its iconic cypress-tupelo swamps, at 260,000 acres, this block of forest represents the largest remaining contiguous tract of coastal cypress in the US.





**Most “local” people living in Louisiana refer to the Atchafalaya Basin/Swamp as the Bayou. I can attest to the fact that there are a lot of Cajun French people, a lot of alligators, and a lot of snakes living in this area since I was stationed near there at New Iberia Naval Air Station while in the Navy. I found all three to be very unfriendly and dangerous! I was happy to leave southern Louisiana and I have no desire to ever go back.**

**Story time: The following (Bayou Country) is from a chapter in a book I wrote in 2001 titled “MY GREATEST ADVENTURES”.**

### *Bayou Country*



**I joined the Navy in October 1961 and after two months of Boot Camp at San Diego, CA, I was stationed at the Naval Air Station in New Iberia, LA. New Iberia is a city of about 30,000 people located in Southern Louisiana about 120 miles from New Orleans. I was scheduled to attend weather school at Lakehurst, NJ after 6 months of on-the-job training in Louisiana. I was a weather observer and recorder. My job was to go outside and look at the sky and the instruments and then go inside and send the information to other bases throughout the U.S. and the world. I did this every hour while I was on duty.**

**Well, I thought I was doing a pretty good job until one rainy day when a tornado suddenly appeared and ripped through the base while I stood there watching it go**

across the Air Field about a half-mile away. It damaged a hanger and three or four airplanes. This was my first and only time seeing a tornado in person. Our Weather Forecaster took some heat for not letting the pilots and Base Commander know it was coming but let's face it, nobody can predict the weather 100% of the time.

I joined the base basketball team and in the second game I played in, I broke my arm. I have had a lot of small injuries in my basketball playing days (a small broken bone in my foot, a broken nose (twice), several sprained fingers and ankles) but this was the worst injury I ever had. I was going up for a layup and somebody run (cut) under me and I come down on my left elbow and it resulted in a compound fracture. My left elbow still will not straighten out all the way. A few days after getting a cast on my arm, I was in a bar men's room when two local Cajun guys come in and proceeded to beat the hell out of me. This was the only time I can remember where I really got beat up. I avoid fights whenever possible. I survived the attack but I was having a really bad week.

Yes, South Louisiana is Cajun Country. This is another word for Southern Rednecks who come from French heritage. A lot of these folks did not like us military people invading their territory. They were very unfriendly and ate a lot of "hot" strange food that I didn't like either.

South Louisiana is also Bayou Country. This is another word for a swamp or river with many alligators and snakes in it. This is the only place I have ever heard of where they have an alligator and snake hunting season. While I was there, at least four people were killed while out hunting snakes or boating on one of the Bayou rivers. During mating season, hundreds of Water Moccasin Snakes roll up into a ball and if you are unlucky enough to fall into the water where they are, you will die of hundreds of snake bites.

A few weeks before I left New Iberia, I was attending a party at our Commander's house. He lived on a river and owned a speedboat. Well, a bunch of us were out cruising around on the river when the boat driver made a sharp turn and me and one girl went flying into the river. The girl could not swim and was starting to panic by the time I got to her. I kept her above water until the boat come back to pick us up. I was really happy that we fell in a spot in the river where there were no snakes or alligators. It turned out that the girl was the Commander's daughter and I was a hero for the day.

(End of story)



**The Water Moccasin (also called the Cottonmouth) is North America's only venomous water snake.**

**Yes, there are millions of snakes (54 species) that inhabit Louisiana. Of these, only seven species are venomous. They include:**

- ❖ **The Cottonmouth (Water Moccasin) – Shown above**
- ❖ **The Canebrake Rattlesnake**
- ❖ **Copperhead**
- ❖ **Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake**
- ❖ **Pygmy rattlesnakes**
- ❖ **Harlequin Coral Snake**
- ❖ **Texas Coral Snake**

### **Alligator Statistics and Information**

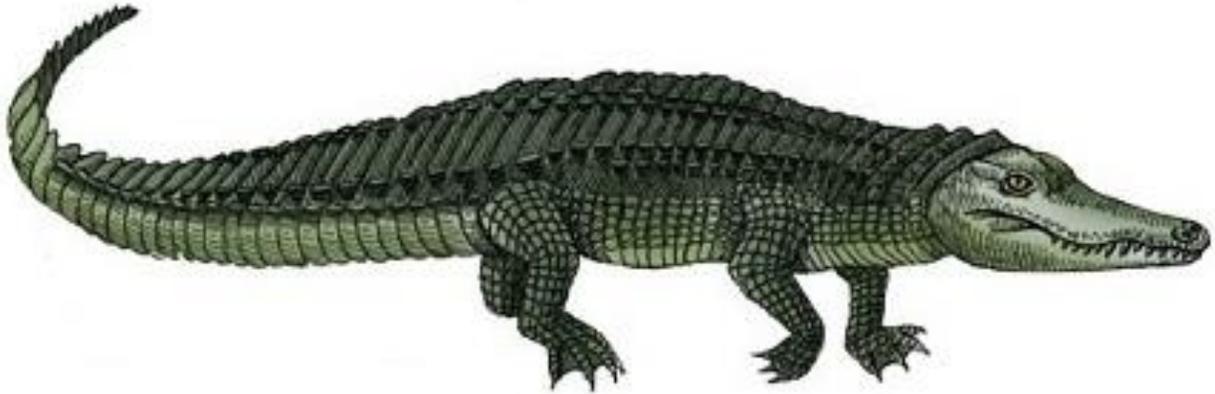
**How many people are killed by alligators every year?**



**Okay, I know that alligators are big, ugly, and have a large mouth with many teeth but for the most part, they leave humans alone. In Florida where they have a lot of people and a lot of alligators, the odds of being seriously injured or killed in an unprovoked alligator attack are roughly one in 2.4 million. The odds of being struck by lightning in the U.S. in any one year is 1 in 700,000. There have only been about 400 people injured and 24 people killed by alligators in the U.S. since they started keeping track in 1948.**



**Here is the critter you really need to worry about. Mosquito bites result in the deaths of more than 1 million people every year!**



### **Physical description**

**American alligators have very short legs, but they are still able to run very quickly over short distances. The two front legs each have 5 toes, and the two back legs each have four webbed toes.**

**Alligators have nostrils at the end of their snouts. This makes it easy for the alligator to breath while it is under water. All it has to do it stick the tip of its snout into the air. During the winter, alligators do this and let the top half of their body freeze in the ice.**

**Both males and females have an "armored" body with a muscular flat tail used for swimming. The skin is so tough because of hard bony plates called scutes. Adults have an olive brown or black or dark tan color with a creamy white underside. Young alligators look different only because they are smaller and have yellow stripes on their tails.**

**American alligators usually have silverish colored eyes.**

### **How do they grow?**

**The temperature at which American alligator eggs develop determines their sex. Those eggs which are hatched in temperatures ranging from 90 to 93 degrees Fahrenheit turn out to be male, while those in temperatures from 82 to 86 degrees Fahrenheit end up being female. Intermediate temperature ranges have proven to yield a mix of both male and females. After hatching, alligators can grow rapidly, especially during the first four years of life, averaging over 1 foot of growth for each year of life. Both sexes reach sexual maturity at around 6 feet in length, however, this occurs earlier in males because they reach this length sooner than females.**

### **How do they reproduce?**

**Breeding takes place during the night, in shallow waters. Females usually start the courtship process. Attracting a mate often involves rubbing, touching, blowing bubbles, and making sounds. The sounds made by males create bubbles and ripples in the water. To test each other's strength, both male and female will often try to push each other under water.**

**Alligators are polygynous. That means that each male mate with many females. During breeding season, male alligators are very territorial, and they will defend their area against other males by head ramming or attacking one another with open jaws.**

**Both males and females reach sexual maturity when they are about six feet long, a length attained at about 10 to 12 years. Courtship starts in April, with mating occurring in early May. After mating has taken place, the female builds a nest of vegetation. Then, around late June or early July, the female lays 35 to 50 eggs. The eggs are then covered with the vegetation nest through the 65-day incubation period. Around the end of August, the young alligators begin to make high pitched noises from inside the eggs. The alligators then break free from their eggs. They are about 6-8 inches long when they are born. Most of these baby alligators will be eaten by predators before they reach one year of age. Mother alligators, though, stay with their young for a few months, and occasionally, a few years.**



**Baby Alligators**

### **How do they behave?**

**Young alligators remain in the area where they are hatched and are generally a social species when young. This method of group living is associated with greater protection from predators. Adults do not display such close knit bonds, however, they do tend to associate loosely in social groups. When forced to live in tighter areas, as a result of drought, these animals tend to ignore each other.**

**American alligators undergo periods of dormancy when the weather becomes cold. They may excavate a cave in a waterway and leave a portion of it above water during this time. In areas where water level fluctuates, alligators dig themselves into hollows in the mud, which fill with water. These tunnels are often as long as 65 feet and provide protection during extreme hot or cold weather.**

**Perhaps the most interesting aspect of alligator behavior is its means of locomotion. Besides swimming, American alligators walk, run, and crawl. Most often they will use a "high walk". In this walk, alligators keep their legs almost directly beneath them, as opposed to most reptiles which keep their legs to the sides at a diagonal. This "high walk" results in greater elevation, allowing alligators to almost entirely lift their tails up off of the ground.**

**When alligators wish to increase speed, their diagonally opposite limbs move forward almost simultaneously. This allows for faster movement, but it also decreases the animal's stability. When the equilibrium is lost an alligator begins moving in a new way, moving its limbs out to the sides and crashing onto its chest. In this manner, an alligator quickly crawls along. This method of movement is most useful when going down steep shorelines into the water.**

#### **How do they communicate with each other?**

**American alligators are the most vocal of all crocodylians, and communication begins early in life, while alligators are still in eggs. When they are ready to hatch, the young will make high pitched whining noises. Alligators commonly bellow and roar at one another. The bellow is loud and throaty, and can be heard from up to 165 yards away. Alligators also emit sounds called chumpfs. These are cough like purrs made during courting.**

**Other communication during mating season includes non-verbal forms such as lifting the head out of the water to show honorable intentions, head slapping by males as a sign of aggression to ward off intruders, and perhaps most notably, the vibrations, bubbles, and ripples seen in the water as a result of sub-audible noises.**

#### **What do alligators eat?**

**Alligators are basically carnivores, but they eat more than just meat, feeding on anything from sticks to fishing lures to aluminum cans. Mostly, they consume fish, turtles, snakes, and small mammals. When they are young they feed on insects, snails, and small fish.**

Alligators hunt primarily in the water at night, snapping up small prey and swallowing it whole. Larger prey is dragged under water, drowned and then devoured in pieces. Alligators have also been known to hold food in their mouth until it deteriorates enough to swallow. They also have a specialized valve in the throat called a glottis, which allows them to capture prey underwater.

With regards to hunting animals on land, alligators are usually considered idle hunters, waiting offshore for unsuspecting prey to drink at the water's edge. With this approach, an alligator is likely to grab the drinking animal's head, slowly pulling it underwater until it drowns. In this way alligators exert minimal energy in capturing prey.

### **What eats them and how do they avoid being eaten?**

The first few years of a hatchlings life are the most dangerous, as anything that can eat a small alligator will. Snakes, wading birds, osprey, raccoons, otters, large bass, garfish, even larger alligators will feed upon young alligators. Once the alligator reaches about 4 feet, its only real predator is man. Extremely thick skin protected by bony plates called scutes prevent harm from most attacks. It is this skin, though, which attracts man to alligators. It is commercially used for the creation of wallets, purses, boots, and other textiles.

### **What roles do they have in the ecosystem?**

American alligators have proven to be an important part of the environment, and therefore are considered by many to be a "keystone" species. Not only do they control populations of prey species, they also create peat and "alligator holes" which are invaluable to other species. Red-bellied turtles, for example, incubates its own eggs in old alligator nests. Alligators also are good indicators of environmental factors, such as toxin levels. Increased levels of mercury have been found in recent blood samples.

### **Do they cause problems?**

Since the alligator will feed on almost anything, they pose a threat to humans. (We discussed this earlier). Dogs and other pets are also sometimes killed.

### **Are they endangered?**

American alligators are listed as threatened by the federal government because they are similar in appearance to American crocodiles. American crocodiles are endangered and the government does not want hunters to confuse the two species. Hunting is allowed in some states, but is heavily controlled.

**SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT – Late August is the alligator hunting season! I’m letting you know just in case you want to jump on a plane to Florida or Louisiana and try your luck at killing a big ole gator.**

### **Alligator hunting**

**With the appropriate licenses and tags, the American alligator can legally be hunted in the Southeastern United States. The states of Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina, and Texas all distribute alligator hunting licenses. North Carolina is the only state in the alligator's range which prohibits hunting. Alligators are protected in North Carolina and can only be killed by wildlife officials.**



### **Gator hunting in Louisiana**

**Currently, over 2,000 licensed alligator hunters harvest 33,000 to 35,000 wild alligators annually in Louisiana. To legally kill an alligator in Louisiana you need a few things – an alligator hunting license; permission from an owner of wetlands where you can hunt; and a tag from wildlife officials for each gator you catch. Without following these steps, aspiring hunters could face fines up to \$950 and 120 days in jail.**

### **Gator hunting in Florida**

**More than 6,000 hunters won permits to take up to two alligators during this year’s hunt. In South Florida, popular hunting areas include the Everglades of western Broward and Palm Beach counties, as well as Lake Okeechobee. Usually working at night, they catch the alligator with a harpoon, fishing rod, spear gun or crossbow. Once they get control, they kill the animal with a knife through the spinal cord or a bang stick, a pole that discharges a shotgun shell or bullet to the skull on contact.**

**Last season hunters killed 6,694 alligators, with an average length of eight feet, four inches. Dead gators can be taken to processors to yield meat and hides, either for**

personal use or to be sold. Hides can be made into products such as shoes, purses, and belts.

### **Gators killed by wildlife officials**

In addition to the alligators killed by hunters, wildlife officials kill about 7,000 alligators a year that are considered to be a “nuisance” to the general public.

### **LAST TOPIC – Do alligators make good pets?**

Baby alligators are much like the babies of any species: cute, little and seemingly helpless. Unable to resist temptation, every year people who have never before attempted reptile care end up purchasing baby alligators to raise at home. Alligators grow about one foot per year, reaching an adult length of 4 to 7 feet, and can live in captivity for more than 50 years. And although a few people have successfully raised alligators as pets, alligator owners face a constant battle against 100 million years of evolutionary programming. Survival instincts cause alligators to view humans as a threat and a possible dinner option. These are not low-maintenance pets. They are large, expensive, wild animals that require constant and diligent care.

Most states have Exotic Pet Laws that make owning an alligator illegal. However, owning a pet alligator in Florida and Louisiana is legal providing you have a permit.

No, alligators don't make good pets!

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