

The modern day dinosaur  
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What animal uses its tail to make pools of water during the dry seasons, as a weapon, to store fat that it will use for nourishment during winter and propel itself through water? Here's another hint; it is a large semi-aquatic carnivorous reptile with four legs and a tail half its body length. I'm sure you've guessed by now, but in case you haven't, I'm talking about the American Alligator.

The alligator is a crocodylian in the genus *Alligator*. There are two different species; the American alligator and the Chinese alligator. The name alligator came from the Spanish word *el lagarto*, which means "lizard." These prehistoric looking reptiles are extremely adaptable and they have not changed much since the early days of the dinosaurs.

In case you haven't noticed, alligators are very active right now. It is mating season for the beasts and if you are near water you may hear the "bellowing choruses" that they make. During the evening hours in spring, male alligators sometimes gather in large numbers for group courtship and do what is called "alligator dances." During these hot, sunny days, you are likely to see them basking out in the sun. These creatures are cold-blooded and need the sun's heat to warm them up.

Once summer arrives, the females will build their nests out of nearby vegetation. Once this plant matter begins to decompose, it will heat up, serving as an incubator to the eggs within. The sex of the young is determined by the temperature. If the temperature is 86 degrees or lower, chances are the clutch will be all female. If the temperature rises above 93 degrees, males will result. Babies emerge from the shells of the eggs by utilizing an egg tooth that is present while hatching. Mom alligators are fierce protectors and will keep the offspring with her for about a year. This is necessary since adult alligators preying on the newborns account for about 50 percent of the deaths in the first year. Females can lay up to 50 eggs, which will hatch in about two months. The young are about six inches long and have orange-yellow stripes on their backs.

Alligators may live to be 50 years old. The American species are found in the southeastern United States: Florida, Louisiana, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, North Carolina, Eastern Texas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas. They prefer freshwater environments such as marshes, swamps, ponds, wetlands, rivers, and lakes. However, they have been known to inhabit brackish water areas such as the Everglades, which is the only place on earth where both alligators and crocodiles live together.

They are huge beasts and can weigh over 1,000 pounds and grow to lengths of 17 feet. Although they appear big and sluggish, they can move fairly quickly for short distances. Contrary to many beliefs, alligators are timid towards people and will, under normal circumstances, try to get away as quickly as possible. However, if a mother is protecting her nest or if the wild animal has been habitually fed by people, it may become aggressive. Once any wild creature loses its natural fear of mankind, usually by being fed, it becomes a danger to people.

Alligators are bone crushing machines when it comes to attacking their prey. The muscles in their jaws are very powerful and when they close or bite down with their mouth, the pressure is phenomenal. However, when they go to open their big snout, the strength is not there. That is why an alligator's mouth can be held closed by just a couple of fingers or duct tape. The food of choice for the creature is fish, but they will munch on insects, snails, crustaceans, worms and whatever they can get a hold of. They have about 20 pairs of inch-long replaceable, conical-shaped teeth on each jaw. These chompers allow them to grab, hold and crush their prey. New teeth just below the gum line push up to replace worn and broken teeth when needed.

Alligators are truly amazing creatures and very much adaptable to their watery environment. When they prepare to submerge under water they have "hatches" that close; a semitransparent membrane or third eyelid covers the eyes; folds of skin close over the ears; muscles contract sealing the nostrils shut; and the throat closes tight, allowing the beast to open its mouth under water without drowning.

You may have heard the term "eyeshine." Alligators are one of the many creatures that can be spotted at night because of this effect, which is the eye glowing red when light is shone on them. Alligators have a thin layer of special reflecting tissue behind each retina which acts like a mirror to concentrate all available light during the darkest periods. This makes them excellent nocturnal hunters. These creatures have very keen eyesight and with their pupils fully dilated, their sharpness of vision is comparable to an owl. Having their eyes located on the top of their head allows them binocular vision and they are good judges of distance. They can pull their soft eye orbits down into their skulls and pop them back up when danger has passed.

Alligators are one of the happy success stories in the environmental realm. At one time, these prehistoric looking creatures were in trouble because of over hunting. Once prohibition of hunting was implemented in Florida, the American Alligator population increased significantly. The creature has moved from the endangered list and hunting by permit is once again allowed. Unfortunately, many species in the Crocodylian family are not so fortunate such as the American Crocodile and the Chinese Alligator. Let's hope that laws will be put in effect that will help their plight as well.

We are fortunate to live in Highlands County where alligators are plentiful. Knowing more about these creatures makes them even more interesting to observe. Next time you're out in nature and you spot an alligator, hopefully you'll have a greater appreciation for just how amazing these animals really are.