

American Alligator

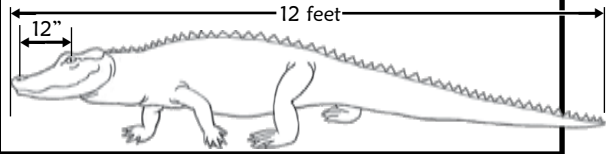
Alligator mississippiensis (AL-ih-gay-ter mississippi-EN-sis)
el lagarte (Spanish) = "the lizard" **mississippiensis** = "of Mississippi"

Alligators are important members of Southeastern swamps. Without the alligators, many birds, reptiles, fish, mammals, plants and others would not survive the frequent droughts. The alligator hollows out a pond, scooping it deeper during the dry season. This creates and maintains a pool where other animals can live and feed as well. The 'gator digs the pool for itself, of course, and may eat some of the other occupants that use it – fish, turtles, birds, snakes, mammals – but not enough to undo the good it does by providing the pool. A female may also dig a long den.

Awesome bellows in the swamp are likely to be alligators, male and female (or bullfrogs – see page 14). But that's not all...

A courting male claps his jaws loudly, and his *subsonic* roars (you can't hear them) vibrate the water. Courting 'gators nuzzle, blow bubbles and wrestle. If the male proves too strong for the female to dunk, she may choose him for her mate.

'Gator Aid Okay, you're canoeing through a swamp when suddenly the water ripples and you see two big 'gator eyes glowing at you. **Uh-oh!** How big is it? Here's a guessing aid: An alligator is about as many feet long as there are inches between its gleaming eyeballs and its nostrils: so...12 inches from eye to nose = a 12 foot 'gator. (And guess what else – its brain is only the size of a chicken egg yolk.)



Alligator Freestyle Since an alligator's feet aren't strongly webbed, it tucks them out of the way and wags its tail from side to side to swim. Its track through the water is a long, wavy line.



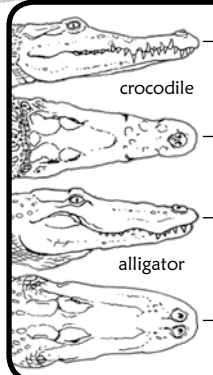
Raising Kids A female alligator rips up plants and pond muck, piling up a mound two feet high and five feet wide at the edge of her pool. Then she hollows out the center and lays 20 to 70 tough white eggs, covering them with more plants and mud when she is finished. The muck heats up (composting) as it rots, keeping the eggs warm until they hatch two months later. Meanwhile, something amazing happens....



about 1/2 actual size

If the nest's temperature averages below 86° during the first two weeks, the babies will be *females*. If it averages 93° and above, they'll be *males*. Temperatures between 86° and 93° produce *both sexes*.

The young hang out for years with mom, who protects them from many predators. But mother alligators don't usually argue with hungry black bears, who eat baby alligators and destroy many nests.



Crocogator Rhyme

'Gators are not crocodiles, although they do have similar styles. A croc likes warm and salty water in the tropics where it's hotter. Florida's tip, U.S., Southeast, is where you'll find **that** awesome beast.

A 'gator's nose is short and wide, and hides the lower teeth inside. The skinny nose of a crocodile lets teeth poke **up outside** its smile. But whether croc or alligator, the best advice is: "see ya later!"

Giant Cane

Arundinaria gigantea

Two kinds of native bamboo, giant cane and switchcane, grow in the Southeast.

Giant cane gets huge – up to 20' tall and 1" in diameter.

Switchcane (a subspecies)

reaches 8' with 1/2" stems. Both spread and multiply into huge thickets called *brakes*. Canebrakes were favorite hunting spots for ancient hunters.

alligator track & scat



22. The American Alligator

The deer had picked a bad time to step onto the alligator's nest mound – the babies were hatching. As late morning sunshine warmed the mound, the young alligators had begun to yip – faintly at first, but louder and more insistently every moment.

The mother alligator had been awaiting this moment for weeks. Just now she was basking near a towering patch of switchcane at the far edge of the pool, several yards away. She became uneasy as the deer got closer and closer to her nest. Sinking out of sight, she swam underwater toward the nest. As she rose silently to the surface near the mound she heard the muffled cries from her babies.

“Yurk!.....yurk!.....yurk!!” came yelps from inside the mound. The mother was electrified. Her young were hatching! They needed her help, and they were being invaded! She lunged from the water with a mighty swipe of her tail and tremendous shoves from all four feet.

A deep hiss, like the latte steamer in a coffee shop (but much louder), blasted from her throat. The deer stumbled backward in panic and scrambled away with a great crash of breaking twigs and branches.

The mother alligator followed for a few rushing steps, then swung

back toward the mound. She scraped carefully at the muck with her long front claws and brushed it aside with her chin. Soon the nose of a tiny alligator poked into the air. One by one, the little hatchlings clawed their way out of their eggshells.

The mother carefully cracked open any unhatched eggs between her teeth and carried the still-moist hatchlings down the sloping mound to the tea-colored water in her huge but surprisingly gentle jaws. Some hatchlings crawled to the water by themselves.

Brightly striped with black and tan markings, the eight-inch-long alligators had charming “smiles” and tiny pinprick teeth that could cheerfully wrap around tadpoles, dragonfly larvae, and little fish. On land they would snap up dragonflies, grasshoppers and other insects. Soon they would eat larger fish, frogs, small turtles, mice and shrews.

Right now, as hatchlings, *they* were food for herons, snapping turtles, and even bullfrogs. In fact, they had barely gotten to the water when one little brand-new alligator came face to face with a hungry mink.

