

RANGER'S GUIDE TO ALLIGATOR LORE

WHY ALLIGATOR? English settlers corrupted the name 'el lagarto' meaning, the lizard, a name given to it by early Spanish settlers in Florida.

WHAT DOES IT EAT? Garfish, turtles, birds, and any other animal that gets careless. Big ones have killed cows. Here at Anhinga Trail we most often see them capture garfish and coots.

HOW DOES IT EAT? To open its mouth, the alligators does not merely drop its lower jaw but raises its head and upper jaw. The teeth are used for seizing and holding prey--not chewing. Because an alligator cannot chew, its stomach has two parts--a muscular gizzard and a digestive section. The gizzard's grinding of food is aided by swallowing hard objects.

WHEN DO THEY COME OUT TO SUN? When air temperature is more comfortable than water temperature. If it is either too cold or too hot the 'gators stay in the water.

ARE THEIR EYES ALWAYS OPEN? No. They close upper and lower lids to sleep just as we do. They also have a third lid inside; a transparent one which they always close (from forward aft) when submerging. Their eyes reflect a light brilliantly at night. Young of both sexes and adult females reflect greenish yellow, but the eyes of adult males reflect ruby red, even from 400 to 500 feet.

HOW DO THEY HEAR? They have ears just back of the eyes. All you can see outside is a crescent shaped opening. This is closed by the flap of skin whenever the alligator submerges.

ARE THE JAWS REALLY SO POWERFUL? Yes. A large one can crush the legbones of a cow at a snap. They have enormous power to bite and hold but so little to open their jaws that a man can hold the mouth of a big bull snout with one hand!

AND THE CROCODILE IS DIFFERENT BECAUSE ITS UPPER JAW IS HINGED? No. Animals with backbones do not have hinged upper jaws. That is a fable you hear a lot, but it is not so.

THEN HOW DO YOU TELL ALLIGATORS FROM CROCODILES? Well, alligators living in un-muddied waters have a base color of black, whereas a crocodile's base color is olive gray. If the animal is black it is an alligator - but if gray, it may be just a muddy alligator. The snout of an alligator is broad and blunt; the snout of a crocodile is much narrower and distinctly tapers forward to the tip.

DO THEY HAVE DENS UP ON THE BANK? Again no. They usually pick a bank which is out of the water and dig a cave back under it beneath the water. They use the same cave every winter and may add to it each year until a very old one's cave may be 40 feet long and branched.

HOW DO THEY BREATHE WHILE UNDER WATER? They don't. They have to come to the surface. In the cave they have a small breathing hole through its roof. They sometimes hold their breath for longer than forty-five minutes.

HOW BIG DO THEY GET? There is a record of one which measured 19 feet 2 inches long. They were slaughtered by hide hunters for over 50 years before the Park was established so that only rarely has one escaped long enough to grow to 12 feet. The same situation prevails from South Carolina to Texas.

DO THEY REALLY LIVE TO A GREAT AGE? Since all wildlife in the Park, including alligators, is never caged, there is no way of determining their exact age. Baby 'gators are 3 to 10 inches when hatched and grow around 12 inches a year. They average 2 feet long when a year old.

HOW DO THEY HAVE THEIR YOUNG? The female makes a nest of weeds, rotting leaves, etc., piled in a mound above the water. She lays as many as 60 eggs in a cavity in this mound. They hatch out after about 65 days; the heat of the sun and the decaying vegetation incubates the eggs.

DO THEY TAKE CARE OF THEIR YOUNG? Yes, the female is a model parent. She guards the nest faithfully until the eggs hatch. After that she keeps the young ones with her and protects them until time to start another brood next year. She doesn't feed them, they survive on their own by eating small fish and other aquatic life.

WHAT TIME OF YEAR DO THEY BREED? They mate in April and May, and lay their eggs in late May or early June. The eggs hatch in late July, August, and early September,

DOES BELLOWING HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH MATING? Yes, the bull 'gator bellows and gives off a spray of musk at the same time, and the female comes to him.

WHAT DOES IT SOUND LIKE? Small bulls bellow about like a cow mooing. Big ones roar like a big truck trying to get out of a mud hole.

DO THEY FIGHT? Yes. When breeding season approaches, the big bull may kill any young bull foolish enough to wander close. An 11-footer at Anhinga Trail killed two that way in March 1950. Apparently big bulls sometimes do look for each other to fight, also.

ARE THEY DANGEROUS TO MAN? The female will drive a man away from her nest, and any alligator is dangerous if cornered. Ordinarily they are afraid of man on land or in the water; however, there have been a few records of water attacks, and it is considered unwise to swim where alligators are known to live.

DO ALLIGATORS LIVE OUT IN THE OPEN EVERGLADES? Yes, as the water dries up in the glades during the winter season, a big 'gator will dig in a low place while there is still water in it and deepen it into a small pond. He tears sod and muck loose with his claws and washes it away with a current set up by swimming motions of his tail. When the water table drops he digs in deeper. If bed rock is near the surface, he may be obligated to move to a better place. Big 'gators wander about, but will come back to the same little pond year after year and keep it from silting up. These ponds are called 'gator holes.

WHAT GOOD IS AN ALLIGATOR IF IT EATS THE BIRDS? The ponds they make and keep open in the glades are refuges into which the fish can concentrate and live when the glades go dry. There the fish are a food supply for the wading birds. For every water bird a big 'gator eats in the glades, he provides a feeding place for maybe ten. And the new crop of young birds each year easily replaces what the 'gators get.

IF THE ALLIGATORS WERE REMOVED, THE PONDS WOULD SILT UP, THERE WOULD BE FEWER DEEP PLACES FOR FISH TO CONCENTRATE IN THE DRY SEASONS, AND THE WATER BIRD POPULATION WOULD DROP! That's exactly right. And loss of these ponds would also drop populations of otter, deer, and other wildlife.

WHY IS THERE A REGULATION AGAINST FEEDING THE ALLIGATORS? They are too large and powerful for such familiarities.