

U.S FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE

Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee, National Wildlife Refuge, Florida



FLORIDA ALLIGATORS -

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

A member of the crocodile family, the American alligator is a living fossil from the Age of Reptiles, having survived on earth for 200 million years.

Though they live in refuge wetlands year-round, **the best time for viewing alligators is during spring and fall when temperatures are mild.** This is when they're most likely to spend the day sunning themselves on mud flats and the banks of impoundments. During the hottest part of the summer, alligators are a little less conspicuous, spending much of their time floating in the canals and aquatic impoundments.

Although alligators should be considered dangerous, they are inherently afraid of humans, and typically pose no serious threat if left alone. It's when people start feeding an alligator that it begins to lose this fear and can become extremely dangerous to people, especially small children and pets. It is a violation of state and federal law to feed or harass alligators in any way.

DIET

Alligators will eat just about anything, but primarily consume fish, turtles, and snails. Small animals that come to the water's edge to drink make easy prey. Young alligators mostly feed on insects, crustaceans, snails, and fish.

BIOLOGICAL ROLE

Alligators help control numbers of rodents and other animals that might overtax the marshland vegetation.

The alligator's greatest value to the marsh and other animals within it are the "gator holes" that many adults create and expand through the years. During the dry season, gator holes provide vital water for fish, insects, crustaceans, snakes, turtles, birds, and other animals in addition to the alligator itself.



BREEDING

The alligator's breeding season begins in the spring. Males bellow loudly to attract mates and warn off other males and females build a nests of vegetation, sticks, leaves, and mud in a sheltered spot in or near the water. After she lays 20 to 50 white, goose-egg sized eggs. She remains near the nest throughout the 65-day incubation period, protecting the nest from intruders.

DECLINE AND PROTECTION

In 1967, under a law that preceded the Endangered Species Act of 1973, the alligator was listed as endangered. A combined effort by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and State wildlife agencies in the South saved these unique animals. Today, although the American alligator is secure, some related animals—such as several species of crocodiles and caimans — are still in trouble. For this reason, **the Fish and Wildlife Service continues to protect the alligator under the ESA classification as “threatened due to similarity of appearance.”**

