

## *Common Myths and the Truth about Alligators*

*Myth: Alligators can grow to enormous proportions, over 20 feet in length and weighing a ton or more.*

Fact: The longest recorded length for an alligator is 19' 2". This animal was trapped in the early 1900's in the State of Louisiana. Most wild alligators do not get above 13 feet in length, and may weigh 600 pounds or more. Also, the weight of an alligator can vary greatly in relation to its length.

*Myth: Alligators live for hundreds of years.*

Fact: Alligators in the wild are believed to live 35-50 years. In captivity their life span may be significantly longer, perhaps 60-80 years. Currently, there are no scientific methods of analyzing an alligator's age while it is alive.

*Myth: Alligators will chase people.*

Fact: Bigger gators shy more readily. That's how they lived to be so big. One SCDNR trapper who has trapped more than 2,000 alligators in 17 years, has not had a single alligator, that wasn't cornered, move aggressively toward him.

*Myth: You should run zigzag if you come across an alligator.*

Fact: This is a common misconception. First, it is rare for an alligator to pursue a human because humans are too large to be suitable prey. However, if an alligator does make an aggressive charge, run fast and straight (away from the alligator, of course). They usually do not run very far. But remember they are most likely to charge at you if you are near their nest.

*Myth: Alligators are immune to the bite of poisonous snakes.*

Fact: Alligators are not immune to snake poison. However, they do have extremely tough skin, and an armored back protected by bony plates called scutes. It is possible that this protection may prevent a snake's fangs from penetrating the skin.

*Myth: Alligators have poor eyesight.*

Fact: Alligators actually have very good eyesight, which is an important adaptation for hunting. They are especially adapted to see and sense movement of potential prey animals. The position of their eyes on their head (almost on the side) gives them a wide sight range. The only place they cannot see is right behind them.

*Myth: Alligators are not good climbers.*

Fact: Alligators have sharp claws and powerful tails to help them push their bodies up. Young alligators are agile climbers and adults have been known to climb fences to get to

water or escape captivity. Low fences, therefore, may not be sufficient protection for pets in areas where alligators are present.

*Myth: Alligators make good pets.*

Fact: This is entirely untrue. Alligators make terrible pets. Although baby alligators may seem like a cool pet, it is illegal to possess or take an alligator without the proper licenses and permits from the SCDNR. Alligators are purely instinctual hunters and do not show affection. Unlike cats and dogs, alligators will never love the hand that feeds them.)

The American alligator is the only large predator remaining in South Carolina, yet many visitors and residents remain unaware of how to avoid potential conflicts with it. Good judgment and the ability to understand the animals' behavior are important for avoiding problems. Because alligators are regularly observed lazily basking along water bodies, many people mistakenly assume that they are docile and harmless. Normally, alligators will stay away from humans and pose little threat to them. However, alligators should never be approached and people should avoid becoming complacent in and around water bodies. Alligators' predatory nature and potentially large size demands respect. Alligators can live more than 50 years and may exceed 1,000 pounds. The record length documented in South Carolina was 13 feet, 1 inch and because pets, such as dogs, closely resemble alligators' natural prey, attacks on pets are not uncommon. Also, although attacks on people are rare, they do occur, and more than 20 fatal attacks by large alligators have been documented. Even when bites are minor, every alligator bite requires prompt medical treatment because of the high infection potential. Those animals that have been fed by humans are particularly dangerous because they quickly associate people with food and will aggressively approach them. The American alligator is quite agile and quick, even on land, and is capable of moving at 30 miles per hour for short distances.

### Avoiding Alligator Encounters

An important part of learning to live with alligators is recognizing that over time, these timid reptiles can become a serious threat to public safety with the wrong kind of encouragement. Unfortunately, close encounters with humans have a cumulative effect on an alligator's behavior that is usually subtle and always very dangerous.

- 7-8 feet in size is when alligators can really start injuring people and taking dogs. Most attacks on humans are by animals 9-10 feet or larger.
- Most alligator problems occur between early March and July which is the breeding season. At this time of year, they are also generally more visible because they want to get out of the cold water and warm up in the sunshine.
- Alligators will not flee while on land – they will face you and stand their ground



Familiarize yourself with these animals before going into their habitat. That includes knowing their nesting habits. Most attacks associated with alligators occur when they have been fed by humans or when they are defending their nests. These basic guidelines will help you to stay on safe terms with the American alligator:

- Never get closer than 15 feet to an alligator. If it hisses or opens its mouth in defense, you should back away even farther.
- Alligators located at the waters edge may act quite differently from those that are landlocked. Alligators should retreat into the water at the approach of humans. If the alligator lets you get very close without some defensive action on its part, it is demonstrating problem behavior.
- Alligators six feet or larger present the greatest hazard. Smaller alligators, four feet or less, pose little threat. However, NEVER toy with the smaller alligators. They may actually be babies or adolescents, and the mother may be nearby.
- Keep a VERY wide margin. Alligators can be surprisingly quick on land and are capable of running short distances in addition to lunging at you with explosive force.
- Most attacks occur while the victim is at least partially in the water. Work in pairs and stay alert when working in or near fresh and brackish water. Remain aware of your surroundings by alternating responsibilities so one person is always on the lookout. Most attack victims report they were unaware of the alligator's presence until the last minute.
- Never feed or entice alligators - it's dangerous and illegal. When fed, alligators overcome their natural wariness and learn to associate people with food.
- Inform others that feeding alligators is illegal and creates problems for others who want to use the water for recreational purposes. Feeding alligators creates a danger for everyone.
- DON'T feed any wildlife in or near the water. Dispose of fish scraps in garbage cans at boat ramps and fish camps - do not throw them in the water. Those people who feed any type of animal living near the waters edge, or anglers who throw

fish scraps into the water, are playing with fire. Although this is not intentionally feeding alligators, it creates a situation where the alligators see these events and begin to associate people as a food source.

- Alligators are most active between dusk and dawn. Therefore, swim only during daylight hours. Large alligators feed most actively during the evening hours.
- Closely supervise children when they are playing in or around water. Never allow small children to play unsupervised near water.
- DON'T swim or allow pets to swim in areas with emergent vegetation (plants growing up out of the water). Alligators favor this type of habitat. Swim in designated areas only.
- DON'T let pets swim, exercise, drink from, or run along the shoreline of waters that may contain alligators. Alligators are attracted to dogs probably because they are about the same size as an alligator's natural prey.
- Leave alligators alone. State law prohibits killing, harassing or possession of alligators.
- DON'T try to remove alligators from their natural habitat or try to keep one as a pet. It is strictly against the law to do so and is dangerous. Alligators do not become tame in captivity and handling even small ones can result in injury.
- Observe and photograph alligators only from a distance. Remember, they're an important part of South Carolina's natural history as well as an integral component of freshwater ecosystems.
- DO fence your waterfront property. Appropriate fencing helps protect family and pets against incursions by alligators.
- Seek immediate medical attention if bitten by an alligator. Alligator bites often result in serious infection.

Other good sources of information on the American Alligator:

<http://www.dnr.sc.gov/wildlife/gator.html>

<http://www.reptilesafari.org/GatorAid.html>

<http://www.sandiegozoo.org/animalbytes/t-crocodile.html>

South Carolina Wildlife TV Show on the American Alligator -

[http://www.dnr.sc.gov/video/may06/mayvideo\\_gator.html](http://www.dnr.sc.gov/video/may06/mayvideo_gator.html)