

Life in the Rocks

Alligators: What Arkansan's Need to Know

By Kelly Irwin



The American Alligator has been a resident of Arkansas for thousands of years. Inhabiting the swamps, sloughs, bayous, river backwaters, and oxbow lakes throughout the Coastal Plain and Mississippi Delta. With the arrival of European settlers the land was cleared and drained and the alligator was hunted without restriction. By the early 1960's the loss of habitat and unregulated hunting had reduced the alligator population to the point where it was endangered throughout the southeastern United States. State and federal protection for over 30 years and restocking efforts

have allowed alligator populations to recover. As a part of this recovery the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission restocked 2800 Louisiana alligators, between 1972 and 1984, throughout the alligator's presumed historic range in Arkansas. The alligator is still protected by state and federal laws, and it is illegal to feed, possess, harass, or kill an alligator. Arkansans need to know and understand that alligators are a part of our state's natural heritage and they should be respected and enjoyed as much as any other fish and wildlife resource.

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Some facts about alligators:

- Alligators are members of the Class Crocodylia and are not “true” reptiles. They are more closely related to birds and dinosaurs, than to lizards, snakes, or turtles!
- The ancestors of today’s Crocodylians (alligators, caimans, and crocodiles) evolved about 200 million years, and the basic body plan has not changed since!
- Alligators are a “kind” of crocodylian, of the Family Alligatoridae, and are not “true” crocodiles. Alligators and their South American cousins, the Caimans, have broad, rounded snouts and live in freshwater habitats. True Crocodiles have narrower, pointed snouts and live in both fresh and salt-water habitats.
- The average adult alligator ranges from 6-12 feet in length. Males grow bigger than females, with females rarely growing over 9 feet in length.
- Alligators are sexually mature when they reach about 6 feet in length.
- Male alligators “bellow” in the spring to attract female alligators.
- Breeding takes place in May and June and eggs laid in late June or early July.
- Females scrape and push soil and vegetation into a “nest mound.” The mound can be up to 2-3 feet high and 6-7 feet long. Heat generated from the decomposing plant material aids in the incubation of the eggs. The female lays from 30-50 eggs in the nest mound and the eggs hatch in approximately 65 days. The female stays near the nest during this time to guard it from predators like raccoons and skunks.
- When it is time for hatching the female opens the nest when she hears the “yelping” of the young, and will gently carry the young to water in her mouth.
- Young alligators are black in color and are boldly marked with yellow crossbars. This helps camouflage them from potential predators. The young will stay close together in and around dense aquatic vegetation for the first year. The female will remain in the vicinity to protect them from predators.
- Alligators survive cold winter temperatures by remaining submerged in deep water and coming up to breath only once every hour or so, or by retreating into dens dug into the banks of rivers or levees.
- Alligators are naturally shy of humans and if not accustomed to human presence will retreat from their approach. However, alligators that have been fed will learn to approach humans looking for a handout, and this creates a serious problem for unsuspecting humans and/or their pets or livestock.
- Alligators are sometimes attracted to fishermen’s surface action lures, mistaking them as potential food.
- Alligators will not attempt to feed during the cool fall and winter months. So duck hunters can safely use their retrievers in alligator country.
- Should you observe an alligator in a swamp, river, or other body of water it is no cause for alarm. If the alligator is being fed or is attempting to feed on humans, pets, or livestock then the nearest Arkansas Game and Fish Commission office should be contacted immediately!

People and alligators can safely exist together if people would follow some simple guidelines and use common sense (see pg.6 for guidelines).

Big

By Bill Posey

Each year I attempt to conduct numerous educational events to various groups of interested people. These vary from elementary and high school students, to teachers and other adults from all walks of life. At some point during the presentations, the question always asked by at least one attendee is; “How big do mussels grow?”

With over 74 species of mussels in Arkansas, my response is usually limited to the size of one species, the washboard (*Megaloniaias nervosa*). However, not all mussels are capable of such large proportions. Many seldom exceed four inches in length, most do not exceed seven inches, and species such as the deertoe seldom exceed two inches in length.

Big can be considered a relative term, since a dog would seem big to a flea, but small compared to an elephant. In the example below, a small juvenile deertoe mussel is attached to a large adult bleufer by its byssal thread. (The byssal thread is used to anchor the juvenile mussel until it is large enough to remain anchored to the bottom.)



Juvenile deertoe on adult bleufer.



Close-up of juvenile mussel on adult bleufer.

During a recent survey in the St. Francis River, I encountered the largest mussel I have seen from Arkansas. At almost 11 inches long and seven inches in depth, it dwarfed all other mussels I had previously encountered.



The next time the question of “how big” is asked, I can now say I have seen one at least 11 inches in length.

Pebbles...

(quick notes on what we've been up to...)

- Kelly did a show on frogs for “Talkin’ Outdoors at the Corner Café” with Wildman Wilson, which aired on AETN.
- Bill presented the results of the 2003 Special Harvest Season on Pool 13 at the April Commission Meeting in Booneville.
- Brian attended the Arkansas Academy of Science annual meeting at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville.
- Kelly held the first Alligator Management Team meeting on April 25 at the Camden office. This meeting was the formative meeting and the team will be directing the future long-term goals of alligator management in Arkansas.
- Bill, assisted by Jeff Quinn, conducted a mussel survey of 27 miles of the Kings River.
- Brian set up and manned a display of Arkansas Crayfish at the Little Rock Zoo’s Earth Day.
- Kelly gave two safety presentations on “The Venomous Snakes of Arkansas” at the Little Rock Headquarters. Both were well attended and resulted in a lively question/answer session at the end.
- Bill attended a meeting with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Memphis District, and U.S. Highway Commission to discuss plans that could lead to de-listing of the endangered fat pocketbook mussel.
- Brian attempted thumb wrestling with a table saw, and lost. He has recovered nicely, with no permanent damage and a nice scar to show for the experience.
- Kelly and his wife, Lisa, were hosted at Grassy Lake by Charles and Diane Sharpe, of Hope, Arkansas. Grassy Lake is a privately owned hunting club on a 3,000-acre cypress swamp near Millwood Reservoir, in Hempstead County. The Sharpes and Irwins spent the weekend surveying the resident amphibians and reptiles. The highlight of the trip was the opportunity to observe five nesting female alligator snapping turtles.
- With the help of Biologists Mark Oliver and Ken Shirley and Education Division staff Pat Knighten and April Layher, Brian conducted AGFC’s second Crayfish Workshop – this time in Mountain Home. Despite Brian’s nervousness at being the primary workshop leader for 2 days, the workshop went very well – the interest level was high, the Who Dat’s catered dinner was scrumptious, and crayfish trapping on Crooked Creek yielded the best night’s catch Brian has seen to date. Too bad the rains made the water too turbid for snorkeling.
- Bill worked a booth at Wild River Country during the annual Hooked on Fishing, Not on Drugs day, and assisted with a HOFNOD workshop at the Grandview Prairie Education Facility.
- Brian helped host KaRST Science and Management Committee meetings at AGFC’s hatchery in Centerton.
- Bill attended a recovery plan meeting in Springfield, Missouri for the recently listed scaleshell mussel.
- Brian, Bill, and Kelly spent three days training AGFC Education Division personnel on the aquatic and terrestrial fauna of Arkansas along the banks of the Buffalo National Scenic River and Blanchard Springs Park.

More Pebbles...

- Bill conducted a “Streamside” class for the Arkansas Association of Conservation Districts in Mt. Ida, Arkansas.
- Brian (and his daughter, Tiger) attended the North American Native Fish Association’s annual convention (for the first time), held in Huntsville, AL. The enthusiasm of this group of native fish enthusiasts for fish keeping and conservation was astounding – definitely a meeting worth repeating!
- Bill attended a Geomorphology Workshop with the White River as the primary topic that was hosted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and The Nature Conservancy.

- Kelly met with AGFC Wildlife Officer, Rick Fraser, in Arkadelphia to conduct a forensic examination of evidence in a case involving alligator snapping turtles.
- Bill conducted an endangered species survey on the Tyronza River.
- Brian and District Fisheries Biologist Mark Oliver joined a group of native fish aquarists on a fish-collecting trip, dubbed “a gathering of fishheads.”
- Kelly met with NRCS and USFWS officials in Little Rock to discuss the potential implementation of NRCS and USFWS programs in setting aside agricultural lands for the conservation of the Illinois Chorus Frog in Clay County.
- Bill met with the author of the forthcoming book on terrestrial snails and slugs of Arkansas.



In keeping with this issue’s theme of “big stuff”, the logperch (Percina caprodes) is Arkansas’ largest darter.

DO's and DON'TS In Alligator Country

DON'T feed or attempt to feed an alligator. It is illegal!

DO tell others that it is illegal to feed an alligator and they are creating problems for other unsuspecting persons if they do.

DON'T throw fish scraps in the water on or near boat ramps or other public access areas. This is just the same as intentional feeding.

DO dispose of fish scraps in a garbage can or bury them far from the waters edge.

DON'T attempt to catch, harass, or kill an alligator. It is illegal!

DO keep your distance to observe alligators.

DON'T swim or wade in areas where alligators have been seen.

DON'T allow children or pets to go in or near water in known alligator habitat.

If you have questions, need further information, or have a problem with alligators contact the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission at the regional office nearest you and ask to speak to the Regional Nuisance Alligator Coordinator.

Brinkley (877) 734-4581
Jonesboro (877) 972-5438
Russellville (877) 967-7577

Camden (877) 836-4612
Mayflower (877) 470-3650

Hope (877) 777-5580
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