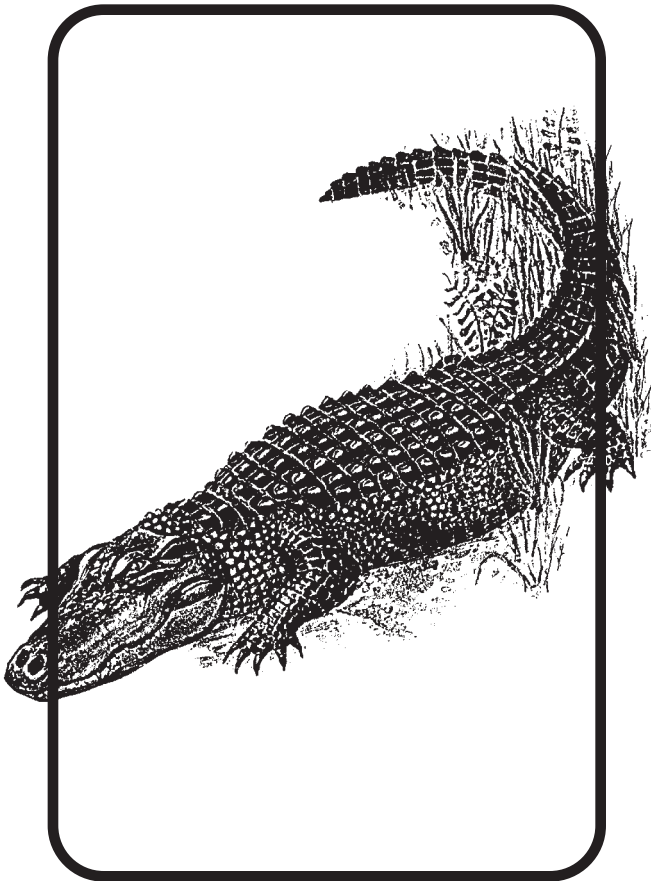


The American Alligator

by Sam Barkley



The American alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*) is the largest reptile in the United States. It belongs to the crocodile family, whose members have changed very little in 200,000 years. It's one of the last surviving members of the group to which dinosaurs also belonged.

General Description

The alligator is a large rough-backed reptile with a broad rounded snout. Adults are mostly black, but young alligators also have bold yellowish markings.

Most adults are 6-12 feet long. However, the largest alligator ever recorded measured 19 feet, 2 inches. There's no visible difference between male and female alligators except size. Female alligators stop growing at 6-7 feet.

Distribution and Habitat

The American alligator is found from coastal North Carolina to the Florida Keys, west to south Texas and north to southeastern Oklahoma and south Arkansas. It occurs in 45 Arkansas counties.

Alligators frequent rivers, estuaries, swamps, marshes, oxbows and lakes. Nesting females and hatchlings require shallow, vegetation-choked freshwater. Males use large bodies of open water more often than females.

Habits

Cold weather drives alligators to their winter dens. These dens are generally holes dug under a bank, and the entrances are usually underwater. Alligators go into an inactive state much like hibernation.

With the arrival of warm weather, alligators begin basking in the sun and feeding. Alligators are most active at

night during the hottest part of the summer, and basking in the sun is confined to early morning.

Ironically, while alligators thrive in hot climates, they can't tolerate long, direct exposure to the sun. When temperatures climb into the high 90s, alligators seek shaded wet areas or remain submerged.

In autumn, alligators prepare for winter. Hatchlings usually remain together in groups or "pods" near the nest, although they may move several hundred feet during the first year.

Sometimes these pods stay together for several years.

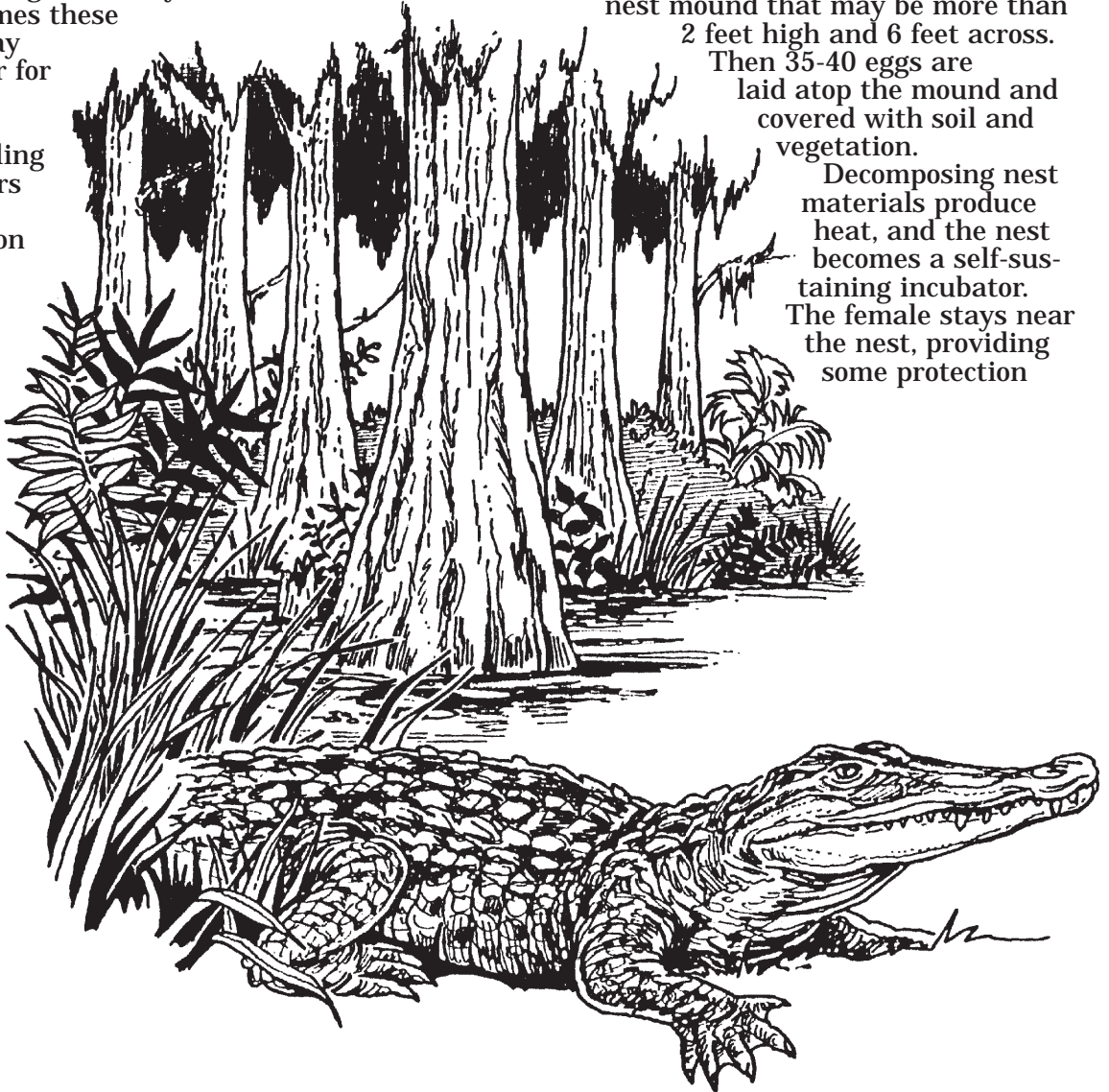
Hatchling alligators feed mostly on small insects and small

vertebrates like fish and frogs. Later, crawfish, birds and larger fish are added to this diet. A full-grown alligator eats anything of a suitable size it can catch. Most of its diet is made up of rough fish, turtles, snakes, birds and mammals.

Reproduction

Alligators become sexually mature at 6 or 7 years of age, or approximately 6 feet in length. Nesting occurs sometime in late spring or early summer. Using grass or other vegetation, the female constructs a nest mound that may be more than 2 feet high and 6 feet across. Then 35-40 eggs are laid atop the mound and covered with soil and vegetation.

Decomposing nest materials produce heat, and the nest becomes a self-sustaining incubator. The female stays near the nest, providing some protection



against egg-eating predators such as raccoons, opossums and skunks. The eggs hatch after about 65 days. The female aids in this process by tearing open the side of the nest and may assist her young by gently cracking the eggshells in her massive jaws then gingerly carrying her newly hatched offspring in her mouth to water. Baby alligators are about 7-10 inches long.

Importance

The alligator plays a vital role in the wetland wildlife community. Its wallowing activities help extend the wetland ecosystem's life by providing needed watering holes for fish and wildlife during droughts.

Alligators may also improve fishing by preying on slow-moving fish, such as gars and bowfins, that compete with game fish.

Alligators are also valuable for bio-medical studies, because they are one of the few egg-hatching animals possessing a secondary palate. Because of this, alligators are cultured under laboratory conditions, so their embryos can be used in experimental micro-surgery that may one day be applied to human embryos with palate developmental problems.

In the past, alligators in Arkansas were also valued commercially for their hides and meat.

Management

During the late 1950s, concern for the American alligator's survival arose because of excessive hide hunting, wetland losses

and a general ignorance of specific management practices to preserve the species. In 1967, the U.S. Department of the Interior listed the reptile as an endangered species throughout its range.

Vigorous federal and state law enforcement, effective management and the species' remarkable resiliency, have allowed the alligator to recover in much of its range. It now seems secure from extinction.

Alligator populations are growing again in Arkansas thanks to increased protection and the vigorous restocking program conducted by the Arkansas Game & Fish Commission. From 1972 to 1984, over 2,800 sub-adult alligators were released in suitable habitat considered to be the state's historical range for the species. Eighty percent were released on private land by request.

Successful reproduction has been documented in six counties previously void of alligators. Today's trend in Arkansas's alligator population indicates a stable to slightly increasing population, but there's still concern for this reptile in our state.

Arkansas's alligators are protected by state and federal laws. The Endangered Species Act of 1973 imposes a penalty up to \$10,000 for illegal activities involving alligators. If you encounter an alligator in the wild, leave it alone and simply enjoy the opportunity to see it. This magnificent reptile deserves man's protection as much as eagles, bats and other forms of wildlife.



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