

Left: Crocodiles are cold-blooded and must avoid extremes of temperature. They bask on the bank at cooler times of the day and then move to the shade or water to escape the heat of the midday sun.

DID YOU KNOW?

- The sex of crocodiles is determined by the incubation temperature. Eggs incubated at temperatures below 85° F hatch into females, while those incubated at above 95° F become males.
- The largest of all crocodiles reaches 25 feet, while the smallest rarely exceeds 5 feet.
- Crocodiles are the closest living relatives to birds.
- In Africa, the Nile crocodile accounts for more human deaths each year than any other meat-eating animal.
- Crocodiles have teeth in their lower jaws that fit into notches on either side of the upper jaws; in alligators, all of the teeth in the upper jaw overlap those in the lower.

A living relic of prehistoric times,

the crocodile is the only surviving member of the reptile family to which the dinosaur belonged.

As such, it provides a fascinating opportunity for study, and may provide new information about the habits of extinct animals.

BREEDING

During the spring, the female digs out a nest in the river-bank where she will lay her eggs. The location of the nest is very important; it must be close enough to the river so that the female can keep watch, but not so near that the nest floods.

Crocodiles mate in shallow water, sometimes after wildly thrashing about. The 30 to 70 white, hard-shelled eggs are covered with sand and guarded by the female until the young inside them begin making chirping noises. The mother then digs out the

young, cracks open the eggshells if necessary, and carries them to the water.

The female remains close to her young for many weeks, until they disperse along the river. Only a small part of her brood will reach adulthood; most fall victim to predators.

HABITAT

Within its range, the Nile crocodile lives alongside rivers, lakes, and waterholes. During the wet season, when the waterways flood, the crocodiles migrate long distances, returning to their old territories when the water level falls.

FOOD & HUNTING

The Nile crocodile preys on animals that come to the water to drink. It will hunt wildebeest, gazelle, buffalo, wild dog, and lion.

The crocodile uses its strong jaws and teeth to seize the animal and drag it under the water until it drowns. The crocodile cannot chew, so the prey is not eaten immediately, but is wedged underwater beneath a tree trunk until it rots. The crocodile eats all of its prey, including bones, hooves, and antlers. Strong juices in its stomach, and pebbles that it deliberately swallows, help it to digest its food.



Above: A Nile crocodile attacks a wildebeest and prepares to drag it under the water to drown it.

Left: The Nile crocodile swims rapidly, propelled by its long, muscular, flattened tail.



Far Left: The eggs hatch 90 days after being laid. Young crocodiles are 12 inches long at hatching and grow about 10 inches a year.

Left: After hatching, the female picks up the young in her mouth and carries them to the water.



AMERICAN ALLIGATOR

CARD 2

GROUP 3: REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS



CLASS
Reptilia

ORDER
Crocodylia

FAMILY
Alligatoridae

GENUS & SPECIES
Alligator mississippiensis



The large American alligator, with its menacing-looking grin and huge teeth, is as feared as any animal in the wild. Sluggish by nature, however, it cannot move quickly on land.

KEY FACTS



SIZES

Length: About 13 ft.; up to 18 ft.
Tail accounts for half of its length.
Weight: 450-500 lb.



BREEDING

Mating season: April to May.
No. of eggs: 25-60.
Hatching time: 2-3 months.



LIFESTYLE

Habit: Usually solitary.
Diet: Insects, shrimp, tadpoles, and frogs when young; fish and small mammals when adult.
Lifespan: Up to 50 years.



RELATED SPECIES

The only other species of alligator is the much smaller Chinese alligator, *Alligator sinensis*.



Range of the American alligator.

DISTRIBUTION

Warm wetlands and swamps of the southeastern United States: Florida, Georgia, and Alabama.

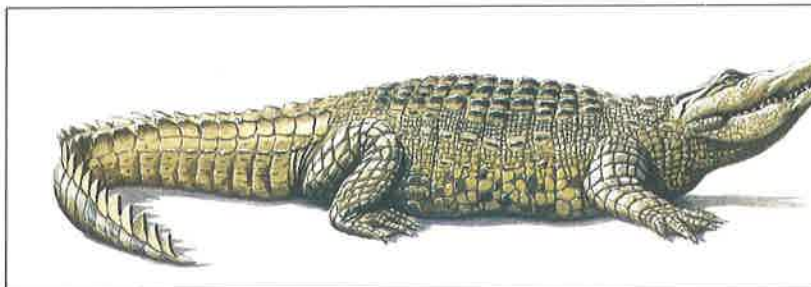
CONSERVATION

Concerted conservation efforts have saved the American alligator from the brink of extinction, and it is no longer an endangered species.

ALLIGATORS AND CROCODILES

Over some of its territory, the American **alligator** shares its habitat with the American **crocodile**, *Crocodylus acutus*, which is far more rare. The two are very similar in appearance, although the crocodile is slightly smaller and less bulky and has a larger, narrower snout. The best way to tell the two apart, however, is by comparing the heads.

The **alligator** (below) has a broad snout and all the teeth in its upper jaw overlap with those in the lower.



The **crocodile** (left) has a pair of enlarged teeth in the lower jaw which fit into a "notch" on each side of its snout. They can be seen even when the crocodile's mouth is shut.



The American alligator is the largest of all members of the crocodile family in North America.

It has a large, somewhat rounded body, with thick limbs, a broad head, and an extremely muscular tail with which it propels itself powerfully through the water.

HABITAT

The American alligator spends all of its time in and around the swamps and rivers of its watery home. In some areas, where the water level fluctuates, the alligator will dig itself a hollow in the mud which becomes filled with water. This guarantees its access to water at all times and also provides other animals with water.

Sometimes these underground hollows are as long as 65 feet. The temperature there remains fairly stable, so the alligator can retreat there to avoid extremes of winter cold and summer heat.

Below: An alligator lies very still and almost hidden in a muddy swamp in Florida.



DID YOU KNOW?

- Together with crocodiles, alligators are descended from reptiles that lived between 225 and 65 million years ago.
- The name alligator comes from the Spanish *el lagarto* which means "the lizard."
- There are over 20 species of crocodile worldwide.

ALLIGATOR & MAN

Once widely hunted for its skin, the American alligator came close to extinction earlier this century. A conservation program set up in the 1950s banned hunting and saved the alligator from extinction. Its numbers have since recovered

so well that it is now controlled by organized hunting. Alligator "farms" are popular tourist attractions in the southeastern United States.

Below: Alligators bask in the sun in a special farm where they are bred.



BREEDING

The American alligator's courtship and mating take place at night in shallow water during April and May. Bulls roar loudly to attract females and to warn off other males. The bull is generally much larger than the female. He will swim in circles around her, finally coming alongside to grip her in his jaws and place his limbs over her body.

The female lays her eggs in a nest made of damp, rotting vegetation and mud. After she deposits the eggs, she covers the nest with more vegetation. As the vegetable matter in the nest rots, it gives off heat, which helps to incubate the eggs. They are very vulnerable

at this stage; a rise in water level could flood the nest, drowning the young reptiles while they are still inside their shells.

The young alligators hatch two to three months later. During this time, the female remains close to the nest, driving off any intruders. As they hatch, the baby alligators emit a high-pitched croak, which serves as a signal to the female to open the nest. Only eight inches long, the hatchlings are completely independent at birth and quickly take to the water. The youngsters grow at a rate of about 12 inches a year. They do not reach maturity until they are over six years old.



Left: Perfect replicas of their parents, baby alligators hatch from eggs laid on a rotting mound of vegetation. Within minutes of hatching, they begin making their way down to the water.

FOOD & HUNTING

Alligators eat a wide variety of food. Youngsters feed on insects, shrimp, tadpoles, and frogs. As they mature, they eat small fish and snakes; when they are almost fully grown, their diet is made up almost entirely of fish.

Adult alligators, however, will eat almost anything. Raccoons and muskrats are quickly

snapped up, along with birds, freshwater turtles and snakes.

Alligators hunt most of their prey in water. They snap up small prey and swallow it whole. Larger mammals are generally seized and then dragged underwater and drowned before the alligator tears them into large pieces and swallows them.

Right: Alligators eat almost anything that strays close to them. Small mammals, such as raccoons, fall prey to hungry alligators when they come down to the water's edge to drink.



BOA CONSTRICTOR

GROUP 3: REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

CLASS
Reptilia

ORDER
Squamata

FAMILY
Boidae

GENUS & SPECIES
Boa constrictor

CARD 1



P. Morris Photos

A non-venomous snake, the boa constrictor is nevertheless one of the most feared inhabitants of the jungle. But in reality, it is much less terrifying than many people imagine.

KEY FACTS



SIZES
Length: 3-20 ft.
Coloration: Cryptic; usually broken patterns of brown and cream, resembling leaf litter.
Preferred temperature: 80-90°F.



BREEDING
Sexual maturity: 2-3 years.
Breeding season: In rainy season.
No. of young: 20-60 born alive.



LIFESTYLE
Lifespan: 20-30 years.
Habit: Solitary, except during breeding season.
Diet: Almost any mammal or bird small enough to swallow whole.



RELATED SPECIES
There are several snakes in the family *Boidae*, including the anaconda. Boa constrictors are also related to pythons.



Range of the boa constrictor.

DISTRIBUTION

Principally the rainforests of southern Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay, parts of Peru and Argentina, and islands, including Trinidad.

CONSERVATION

Numbers dropping because of habitat destruction and the leather trade, although it is protected in much of its range.

HOW A BOA CONSTRICTOR KILLS PREY

A boa constrictor cannot chase and catch fast-moving prey. Instead, it lies in wait for unsuspecting animals.

Once a victim is caught, the snake wraps its tail around its victim's body and tightens its grip until the prey can no longer breathe and dies of

suffocation. This is called **killing by constriction** and is how the boa constrictor gets its name.

When the prey is dead, the snake swallows it whole, usually head-first. It takes many days for the boa's stomach to completely digest its prey; it gradually dissolves and passes through to the intestine.



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The boa constrictor kills its prey by constriction.

Once it catches its victim, the snake wraps its body around the prey in coils, tightening its grip each time the victim breathes out. Eventually no longer able to breathe, the prey dies by suffocation.

FOOD & HUNTING

The boa constrictor eats a wide variety of food. Young snakes eat mice, small birds, lizards, and frogs. As the snake grows, the size of its prey increases. Adults will eat monkeys, capybaras, agoutis, caimans, and wild pigs.

The boa is a good swimmer and spends a lot of time in or near rivers. It waits for any possible prey which may come near the water to

drink. Once a victim has been overpowered, the boa constrictor swallows it whole.

Since the boa is cold-blooded and slow-moving, it does not require a great amount of food. After eating large prey, such as a wild pig, the snake will not need to eat for a week or more.

Below: Prey is swallowed head-first and whole.



Ardea London

BOA CONSTRICTOR & MAN

Man is the adult boa constrictor's only enemy. However, young boa constrictors are preyed upon by a large variety of forest-dwelling animals, such as coatis, hawks, caimans, and wild pigs.

In many parts of its range, the boa constrictor is consid-

ered a pest and is killed by farmers because it preys on their chickens. It is believed that the snake also kills other types of livestock.

Boa constrictors are also hunted for their skins, which are sold at high prices. They are killed for food, and also simply out of fear of them.

HABITAT

The boa constrictor's preferred habitat is rainforest, but it is also found in semiarid savannah. Because its range covers such a large area, the boa constrictor varies considerably in color, marking, and size. On Hog Island, off Central Amer-

ica, the boa constrictor is seldom longer than 3 feet; in most of Central America, it reaches 10 feet, while in Trinidad and Venezuela, it can grow up to 20 feet.

In the warmer areas, the boa constrictor is active year-

round. However, in the cooler climates, it may spend long periods of time in inactivity.

Below: It is usually the more active young snakes that climb trees. Adults move slowly and prefer the forest floor.



P. Sterry/Nature Photographers

BREEDING

The boa constrictor has appendages resembling claws on each side of its vent (genital opening). These are the remnants of the hind limbs inherited from the boa's lizard-like ancestors. They are generally larger in the male than in the female, and are thought to be used by the male to stimulate the female to mate.

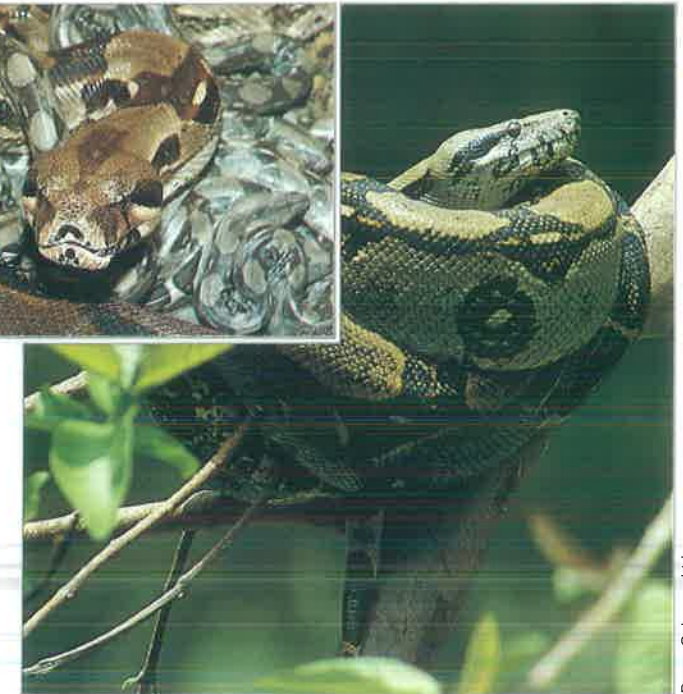
After fertilization, the eggs remain in the female's body, where they develop over several months inside thin membranes. Unlike its close relative, the python, the constrictor gives birth to live, fully formed young. Up to 60 snakes are born at once, each 17 to 20 inches long.

Right: Female with her newborn young.

Far right: A boa constrictor uses its prehensile (capable of grasping) tail to anchor itself to a branch.



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DID YOU KNOW?

- Boa constrictors and pythons are among the most primitive of living snakes, as evidenced by the presence of their vestigial hind limbs.
- When threatened, boa constrictors will hiss so loudly that they can be heard 100 feet away.
- The boa constrictor has a short tail, accounting for less than 20 inches of its length. In many snakes, the tail makes up half of their overall length.
- A hungry boa constrictor can squeeze through chicken wire to get to chickens. However, after eating one or more of the birds, its body becomes too wide for it to escape back through the wire.