

Managing Conflicts with Wildlife: Living with Alligators¹

Holly K. Ober, Harry J. Dutton, Allan R. Woodward, Lindsay J. Hord, and William M. Giuliano²

American alligators are unique and fascinating animals. They are endemic to the southeastern United States, found in only 10 states. Alligators are designated as the official state reptile of Florida, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Although once so rare that they were listed as an endangered species, conservation efforts have helped alligator numbers rebound.

As one of the largest reptiles in North America, alligators are situated at the top of the food chain. In most situations alligators do not harm people. However, alligators can pose potential dangers to people in some situations. In this document, we present some facts about alligators, describe their potential threats to people and pets, and provide suggestions on how to cope with these risks.

Getting to Know Alligators

- The American alligator (Figure 1) can be found from Oklahoma and Texas in the west to North Carolina and Florida in the east. They live in all 67 of Florida's counties.
 - Alligators live mostly in inland freshwater but also use brackish (slightly salty) water. They can be found in almost any wetland, such as swamps, marshes, ponds, lakes, rivers, and canals.
- Alligators are opportunistic feeders, consuming fish, birds, turtles, crabs, crayfish, small mammals, snakes, carrion (dead animals), and even other alligators.
 - As predators, alligators are an important part of wetland ecosystems. They help keep other aquatic animal populations in balance. The holes they form and inhabit in shallow marshes become essential to many other fish and wildlife during droughts.
 - Alligators are one of the largest animals on the continent, with males growing to a larger maximum length than females. Males can grow up to 14 ft long (4.3 m) and



Figure 1. American alligator.

Credits: Thomas Wright, UF/IFAS

1. This document is WEC348, one of a series of the Wildlife Ecology and Conservation Department, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date November 2014. Visit the EDIS website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

2. Holly K. Ober, Extension specialist, Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation, North Florida Research and Education Center, Quincy, FL 32351; Harry J. Dutton, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission; Allan R. Woodward, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission; Lindsay J. Hord, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission; and William M. Giuliano, professor and Extension specialist, Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation, UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is an Equal Opportunity Institution authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function with non-discrimination with respect to race, creed, color, religion, age, disability, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, political opinions or affiliations. For more information on obtaining other UF/IFAS Extension publications, contact your county's UF/IFAS Extension office.

U.S. Department of Agriculture, UF/IFAS Extension Service, University of Florida, IFAS, Florida A & M University Cooperative Extension Program, and Boards of County Commissioners Cooperating. Nick T. Place, dean for UF/IFAS Extension.

1,000 lbs (473 kg), but most stop growing in the 11–12 ft. range; females can grow to 10 ft long (3.1 m) and 250 lbs (116 kg) but are typically 8–9 ft. when full-grown.

- Alligators become sexually mature when they reach 6–7 ft (1.8–2.1 m). Alligators in Florida take 9 to 14 years to grow to sexual maturity.
- Females build nests of mounded vegetation, peat, sticks, leaves, and mud, laying 30–40 eggs during June–July (Figure 2). Eggs hatch in August–September, after 60–65 days of incubation.
- Typically, 25–50% of alligator nests are destroyed by predators, usually raccoons. In wet years, low-lying nests are lost to flooding. Overall, only 40–50% of alligator



Figure 2. Alligator on nest.

Credits: Tony Pernas, USDI National Park Service (<http://www.forestryimages.org>)

nests survive to hatching. In nests that survive, about 70% of eggs successfully hatch.

- Young alligators (Figure 3) are eaten by predators such as raccoons, otters, wading birds, fish, and larger alligators. Leading causes of natural death of adults are cannibalism (alligators eating alligators), injuries from intraspecific fighting, and stress during droughts.
- Wild alligators can live up to 60 years.
- Alligators are most active when temperatures are between 82°F and 92°F. They rely on external sources of heat to maintain their body temperature (they are ectothermic). Alligators stop feeding when water temperatures fall consistently below 70°F, and become inactive when temperatures fall consistently below 50°F.
- Alligators are most active at night during the warmer months. They may be observed basking in the open during the day in the cooler months (Figure 4).



Figure 3. Alligator hatchlings.

Credits: Thomas Wright, UF/IFAS

- Alligators' backs are protected by small bony plates (scutes) just under the skin.
- Alligators have good eyesight, with excellent night vision. They have excellent hearing and sense of smell, and



Figure 4. Basking alligator.

Credits: Tara Piasio, UF/IFAS

they can detect slight movements in the water. Their ear openings, eyes, and nostrils are all near the top of their heads, which allows them to conceal their large bodies underwater and sneak up on prey on the shore or on the surface of the water stealthily.

- Alligators communicate with each other using body displays, movements, vocalizations, and scents.
- Alligators tend to move more as water temperatures rise, when water levels change, and during the breeding season. Movements are greatest for males during the spring breeding season, and least for both sexes during the winter.

Potential Risks and Damage Associated with Alligators

- Alligators can injure and kill humans, livestock, and pets.
- Alligators are capable of climbing steep banks and low fences; smaller alligators are better climbers than larger alligators.
- Alligators pose the most potential danger to people when both are in the water or at the water's edge. During the warmer months, alligators are most active from dusk to dawn, so swimming at these times should be avoided.
- Animals fed regularly by people lose their natural fear of people. Alligators that constantly spend time near people without suffering any ill effects will cease to fear people. This is called habituation. Hand-fed and habituated alligators can become nuisances and may have to be trapped and killed if they pose a threat to people or domestic animals. Florida harvests about 7,000 nuisance alligators per year.
- Florida experiences an average of nine unprovoked alligator bites to people per year, six of which require professional medical care. During the past 65 years, only 22 deaths in Florida have been attributed to alligators.
- Female alligators may act defensively near their nests and young. However, they are unlikely to surprise a person because they typically hiss and approach the intruder on the surface of the water. For this reason, Florida has only experienced one bite to a person by a female protecting her nest or young.

How to Prevent Risks and Damage Associated with Alligators

- Never feed a wild alligator!
- Don't allow pets to swim, exercise, or drink in or near water bodies that may contain alligators.
- Watch for alligators when you are recreating or working in or near the shoreline of fresh or brackish water.
- Don't swim outside posted swimming areas or in waters that might be inhabited by large alligators.
- Dispose of fish scraps in garbage cans. Throwing fish scraps into the water is considered intentional feeding of alligators.
- Keep your distance when watching or photographing alligators.
- Harassing or possessing an alligator is prohibited in Florida. Handling even small alligators can result in injury.

- In Florida, alligators should be killed only by individuals with both a license and a permit issued by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. View the agency's webpage (<http://myfwc.com/license/wildlife/alligator-permits/>) or call your regional office for more information on Statewide Alligator Hunt Permits, the Private Lands Alligator Program, and the Nuisance Alligator Program.
- Seek immediate medical attention if you get bitten by an alligator. Even minor bites can result in serious infection.
- An alligator may be deemed a "nuisance" if it is at least four feet in length and someone believes it poses a threat to people, pets, or property. Call the Nuisance Alligator Hotline at 866-FWC-GATOR (866-392-4286) to report concerns about alligators.

More Information

FWC species information: <http://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/profiles/reptiles-and-amphibians/reptiles/alligator/>

FWC conservation hints: <http://myfwc.com/conservation/you- conserve/wildlife/gators/>

FWC brochure: http://myfwc.com/media/152524/Alligator_Brochure.pdf

FWC Statewide nuisance alligator program: <http://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/managed/alligator/nuisance/>

FWC hunting regulations: <http://myfwc.com/license/wildlife/alligator-permits/>

Extension: <http://www.extension.org/pages/11084/alligators#.U-5EsXnD9D8>

UF/IFAS EDIS on living with alligators: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/uw230>

UF/IFAS EDIS on Alligator ecology and monitoring in the Everglades: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/uw232>

UF/IFAS EDIS on Alligators as ecosystem engineers: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/uw358>