

## A Day in the Life of a Fascinating Reptile, the Alligator

Let's travel to Florida to meet one of the largest of reptiles, the alligator. Alligators live only in the southeastern states of our country, like Louisiana and Florida. Most of the time alligators are pictured in swamps, but many people in Florida have reported seeing alligators in the lakes near their backyards. Having a reptile the size of a lizard in the backyard is normal, but seeing an alligator in a pond is something to get excited about. For such a big reptile, you might be surprised to find that it often isn't easy to spot an alligator in the water.

Alligators like to float just beneath the surface of the water, with only their eyes and nostrils breaking the surface of the water. The rest of their big body just relaxes underneath the water, legs spread apart and the huge tail hanging partway down. The alligator can float at exactly the right level by using his lungs as a kind of inflatable raft, and keeps just the right amount of air for only his eyes to stay above the water. An alligator stays mostly under water for one of two reasons.

The first reason is to keep his body temperature cool. Like other reptiles, the alligator's body temperature depends upon the temperature of the air or water around him. The sun can get very hot in Florida, and since the alligator does not sweat, there has to be another way for him to keep cool. He first opens his enormous mouth, and that will cool him down a little bit. If the alligator is still too hot, he will go into the water to lower his body temperature even more.

The second reason that an alligator stays in the water is to hide himself and wait for lunch to come by. Alligators can catch an amazing variety of animals to eat, including birds, fish, turtles, and even deer. They are quite at home in the water, swim very quickly, and can dive underwater and stay submerged for an hour, or even more. An alligator usually catches birds sitting on the water, but can raise itself up with a few powerful strokes of its tail to snatch one flying near the surface of the water, or just taking off.

Female alligators use their formidable mouths for another reason, to protect her babies. Baby alligators can already catch their own food and swim, but they stay near their mother for a year or more in order to be safe from predators. Even before they are born, the mother alligator stays by the nest she dug in the dirt to keep others (like turtles) from eating her eggs. When the eggs are ready to hatch, the babies inside the eggs start making noises. Some babies come out of the eggs by themselves, but other eggs are taken into the mother alligator's mouth, where she gently rolls them around until the baby alligator

can come out of the hard shell.

This brief introduction to one of the most ancient and interesting of reptiles can be used as a starting place to assemble your own collection of alligator facts. Make sure to watch the next wildlife show about these big reptiles, and considering visiting one the next time you take a trip to Florida.