

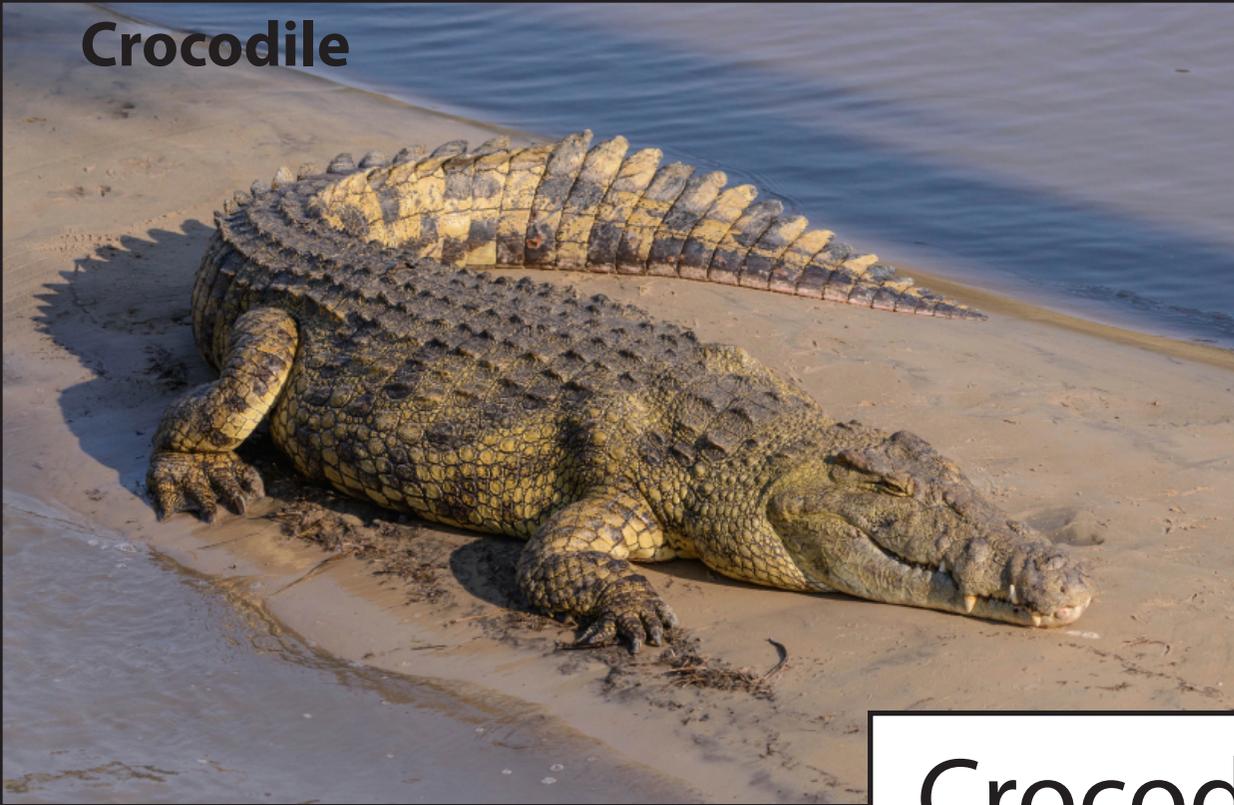
Crocodylia

Discussion Questions:



- 1) What animals belong to the crocodylia group?
- 2) What types of environments do they inhabit?
- 3) How do you tell the difference between a crocodile, a caiman, a gharial and an alligator?
- 4) Why are crocodiles such good predators?

Crocodile



Caiman



Crocodylia



Alligator



Gharial (Gavial)

Crocodiles

The name crocodile comes from the Ancient Greek word 'crocodilos' meaning 'lizard'.

There are 14 different species of crocodile in the world today. They inhabit warm, tropical environments and can be found throughout Asia, Africa and Central America.

The largest species of crocodile is the esturine crocodile. These crocodiles inhabit South East Asia and Australia. An adult male can grow to an average size of 5 metres (17ft). Some have been known to reach 6-7 metres (20-23 ft). These are the most aggressive species of crocodile.

The Nile crocodile is the second largest species of crocodile. It generally does not inhabit salt water environments and can be found in lakes, rivers and marshlands of the central and eastern parts of the African continent.

The smallest crocodile species is the dwarf crocodile, which grows to an average length of around 1.5 metres (4.9 ft). This species is found in the subtropical regions of western and central Africa.



Esturine (salt water) crocodile



Dwarf Crocodile

Caiman

There are 6 species of caiman living in the world today. They can be found in warm climates in parts of Central and South America, including the Amazon rainforest.

Caimans get their name from the spanish word for alligator. Caimans and alligators are related.

The Black Caiman inhabits the Amazon Basin and is the largest predator in the rainforest ecosystem. Though the females are smaller, male caimans can reach a length of about 5 metres (17 ft).

The Spectacled Caiman inhabits lowland wetland regions of Central and South America. These animals are smaller, with males reaching 1.8-2 metres (5.9-6.6 ft). They get their name from the ridges around their eyes that make them look like they are wearing a pair of spectacles!



Spectacled Caiman



Black Caiman

Alligator

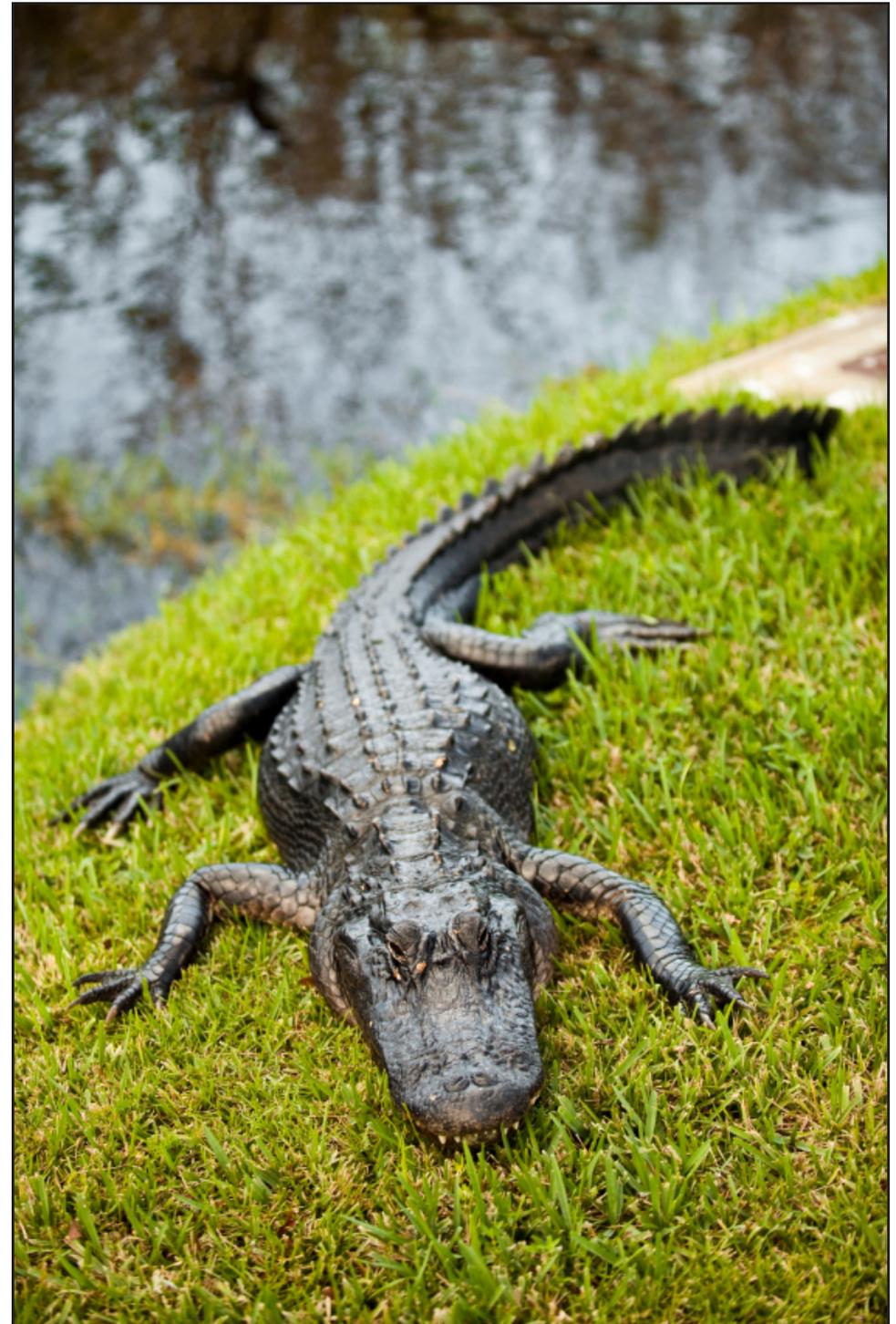
There are 2 species of alligator living in the world today:

- The American Alligator, which inhabits the south-eastern states of the USA, including Florida, Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, Mississippi and Texas.
- The Chinese Alligator, which inhabits subtropical temperate regions of east China.

An alligator has a rounded, u-shape snout. Their upper jaw is wider than their lower jaw and tends to overlap it, hiding the teeth of the lower jaw.



Chinese Alligator



American Alligator

Gharial (Gavial)

The Gharial, or gavial as it is sometimes known, inhabits the river systems of Northern India and Bangladesh. They get their name from the bulbous pot-shape that develops on the end of their snout, after the Hindi word *ghara*, meaning 'mud pot'.

Male gharials reach an average length of about 3.9 metres (13 ft) but older gharials have been known to reach 6 metres (20 ft).



A gharial's long thin snout with razor sharp interlocking teeth is well adapted to catching fish, which is its primary food source.

The population of gharials has steadily declined in recent decades due to habitat loss and a reduction in their food sources due to over-fishing. The species is currently endangered.

Crocodiles hatch from eggs that are laid in nests dug into the river bank. The eggs incubate for about 2 months before hatching. The parent usually guards the nest until the babies hatch. They are far more aggressive and territorial during the breeding season. Some parents help the babies get to water.



Why do crocodiles often rest with their mouths open?

Animals have different ways of controlling their body temperature. Humans have warm blood which generally keeps our body at an optimal temperature. We still need to be able to cool down our bodies on a hot day, or when we are exercising. Our bodies have developed an amazing way of automatically regulating our temperature for us. We have sweat glands that release excess heat from our bodies and produce moisture in the pores of our skin. When a breeze passes over the wet skin, it cools us down.

Many animals also use moving air to cool down their bodies. Dogs, for example, will pant, exhaling warm moist air and allowing cool air to pass over their tongues.

All reptiles are ectothermic, which means that they have cold blood and rely on using the environment to control the temperature of their bodies. For example, they will go and lie in the sun to warm up and seek shade, water or mud to cool down.

Crocodiles have developed a behaviour that is similar to panting. When their temperature gets too high they sit with their mouths wide open, allowing the breeze to pass over the inside of their mouth. This allows body heat to escape and cools down the blood passing through vessels just under the skin.



How do you tell the difference between a crocodile and an alligator?

Crocodiles have a v-shaped snout, while alligators and caimans have u-shaped snouts.

Alligator and caimans have a larger upper jaw which overlaps the lower jaw. This means that only their top teeth show when their mouths are closed.

When a crocodile's mouth is closed, its long top and bottom teeth show, as well as smaller interlocking top and bottom teeth.



Crocodilians are excellent swimmers. They propel themselves through the water with their powerful tail. They are very agile and are able to leap out of the water to catch prey. They have webbed toes on their hind feet which helps them change direction easily, allowing them to speed through the water.



Masters of Stealth

The crocodilia family are masters of a quiet attack. They can stay in the water with just their eyes and nose exposed. They will stay submerged, balancing on their hind feet, then glide silently toward their unsuspecting prey.

They are extremely swift swimmers. They will take their prey down into the water in their powerful jaws while rolling their bodies over and over until their victim drowns. They usually swallow their food whole.

