

Why the Alligator Crossed the Road . . .

By Fred Boyce

Alligators were in the news again at the beginning of May, as one of the prehistoric beasts was spotted (wouldn't take much to spot, I suppose) crossing the busy lanes of Highway 24 by Carolina Home & Garden, causing traffic to stop and motorists to take a moment to contemplate a scene that might have occurred 30 million years ago, sans cars and pavement.

I have to chuckle whenever I see a sticker on a car that says "Local." Alligators are in fact *real* locals, though people always seem surprised to learn that they live here. Coastal North Carolina actually marks the northernmost extent of their natural range, and they have inhabited our coastline for an awfully long time, predating by a good stretch the earliest humans and most modern mammals.

Alligators are crocodylians, a group of aquatic reptiles that also includes crocodiles, South American caiman, bizarre Indian gharials and the *Tomistoma*, the slender-snouted crocodile of Indonesia. The crocodylians, in turn, are members of the *Archosauria*, a large and influential group known as "the Ruling Reptiles," most of which, including all of the dinosaurs and giant marine reptiles of the Mesozoic era, are long since extinct. However, their familiar descendants—the birds—carry on.

Alligators and their kin are thus more closely related to dinosaurs, and to birds, than they are to other reptiles such as turtles, snakes and lizards. Like birds, crocodylians have four-chambered hearts, and the females construct and guard their nests, often caring for the young for up to three years after they hatch, though a year or two is more common with alligators. Alligators are normally very shy and reclusive, but a female guarding her nest is uncharacteristically fearless, and nests should never be approached. Nests resemble piles of lawn debris—large mounds of grasses and other vegetation close to water, usually in out-of-the-way places.

Never feed an alligator; they become very quickly accustomed to handouts, and never walk dogs or allow small children to play along the edge of waterways. Alligators are very shy of adult humans, but can be tempted by what may appear to be smaller prey. They especially love dogs (but not in the same way you do). An alligator can lie as still as a statue all day long but suddenly explode into action if disturbed or frightened, and they can run very fast—up to 35 mph—in very short bursts.

Normally, however, alligators are extremely reclusive and, for such large reptiles, are very good at remaining unseen. They have a low profile in the water, being built much like a civil war ram or ironclad, with their eyes and nostrils elevated on little prominences that stay above the waterline while most of the animal remains submerged. A good way to find out if alligators are present in a pond or waterway is to go out at night when they are most active and shine a powerful beam of light across the surface of the water. Alligator eyes will glow a brilliant red, like roadside reflectors.

Their brains are similar to those of birds, and they are indeed quite intelligent. They have very good eyesight, and their hearing is acute. They can recognize human faces and voices, and even learn their own names.

The American alligator is completely endemic to the southeastern United States, occurring from coastal North Carolina all the way down to the Florida Keys, and along the Gulf Coast to eastern Texas. The largest alligators are always males, or "bulls." These days, 12 to 14 feet can be considered to be their maximum length, while females only reach 7 to 8 feet and are much less "jowly" looking. There is only one other species of alligator in the world—the much smaller Chinese alligator—which is severely threatened by habitat loss.

Like most other crocodylians, alligators have long been prized for their skins, from which many fashionable leather products are still made. During the Civil War, when there was a severe leather shortage in the South, alligator hides provided the

majority of leather for the Confederate military. By 1969, the American alligator was severely threatened with extinction, and we almost lost them forever. The Endangered Species Act of 1973 offered full protection and a chance for wild populations to recover from over-hunting.

Meanwhile, the demand for alligator skins and meat was met by the farming industry. Crocodylians respond well to farming, and since the farmed products are much more affordable, they tend to undercut poaching and make it unprofitable. This idea of "conservation through utilization" has spread across the globe, and prominent manufacturers of leather products, especially in Europe, are also leading proponents of crocodylian conservation. They fully understand that should these animals become extinct . . . so would they.

In any event, alligators are a conservation success story here in the U.S., and the reason they are so often seen crossing the road or turning up in other non-swampy places each spring, especially in April and May, is that these months mark the peak of the breeding season when big bull alligators, filled with raging hormones, are battling for territory and mates. For the losers, it's a case of "I don't care where you go, but you can't stay here!"

As expansive human development continues to claim more and more wild habitat, the options for wayward, displaced males keep diminishing. If one does turn up near you, don't try to take any action yourself. Call NC Wildlife Resources at 800-662-7137. Better yet, as motorists did on Highway 24, just say, "See you later, alligator," and let it find its own way back home.

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The author came across this male alligator sulking in a ditch along Highway 33 in Pamlico County on May 6, 2018. He had no doubt lost a territorial battle with another male and had been kicked out of the swamp. Best to leave them strictly alone and let them pout in peace.

—Photo by Fred Boyce

PINE KNOLL SHORES
4TH OF JULY PARADE
July 4
10 A.M.
GARNER PARK