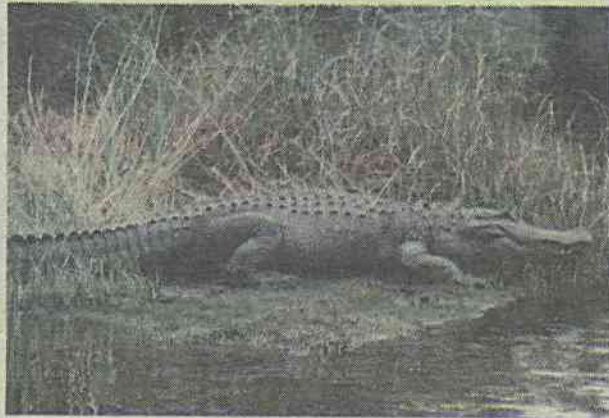


ASK the AQUARIUM

Virginia's wetlands. Alligators living in the waters around the *USS North Carolina* battleship in Wilmington have become something of a tourist attraction.

Once hunted to near extinction, these ancient reptiles were listed as endangered in 1967. They have made a remarkable comeback. In 1987 their status was downgraded to threatened, and even though their numbers have increased dramatically, they remain protected to prevent trafficking of look-alike reptiles such as the American crocodile. Today, populations are believed to total more than five million from the Carolinas to Texas, but habitat loss and pollution remain concerns.



Alligators can be found in many of North Carolina's wetland areas. State wildlife officials are allowed to remove problem animals if they become a threat to human populations.—*Photo courtesy of Rick Haas*

These aquatic giants are extremely adaptable and can live in brackish marshes, bayous, bogs, swamps, creeks, ponds, lakes, canals, ditches, backwaters and large rivers. As carnivores and opportunistic predators, they feed on almost anything that moves—frogs, snakes, birds, fish, turtles, lizards, other alligators, small mammals and larger prey such as deer. They can replace any of their 70-80 cone-shaped teeth when lost, resulting in a total of 2,000-3,000 potential teeth in a lifetime. They are good swimmers, have excellent eyesight and sense of smell and an average lifespan of 35 to 50 years.

Alligators are cold blooded and can't tolerate extreme temperatures. To warm up, they bask in the sun. In winter they retire to dens that are usually accessed under water. They are fairly slow moving on land, but don't be fooled. They can travel quickly for short distances.

To ambush prey, alligators lurk near the shoreline and lunge with lightning speed to capture unsuspecting quarry along the water's edge. They are known for their "death roll," pulling and drowning their victim under water before ingesting it whole or in large chunks.

Alligators easily lose their fear of humans—and feeding them or any wild animal endangers both the animal and people. In North Carolina, feeding alligators is illegal and carries a fine up to \$200.

Alligators are protected as a threatened species under federal law. Some states, however, are authorized to manage and control populations. In North Carolina, hunting or killing alligators is illegal. Only state wildlife officials are allowed to intervene or remove problem animals. For a map of known alligator occurrences in North Carolina visit www.fws.gov/nc-es/reptile/alligat.html.

Discover more fascinating facts about North Carolina's aquatic animals and environments by visiting the aquariums on Roanoke Island, at Fort Fisher and at Pine Knoll Shores, or Jennette's Pier in Nags Head.

... And Happening at the Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores:

Dinosaurs! See dinosaurs face-to-face and hear them roar as "Dinosaur Adventure" turns the aquarium's marsh boardwalk into a time machine. Step outside and travel back millions of years to meet these strange creatures that roamed the earth during the Triassic, Jurassic and Cretaceous periods.

Q: Do we have alligators in North Carolina?

A: Yes. Our more southern counties have the largest populations; however, alligators (*Alligator mississippiensis*) have been seen as far north as the Great Dismal Swamp near the Virginia border. It's also likely they have ventured into

The fierce allosaurus with its huge head and big teeth, the long-necked apatosaurus, the fast and agile coelophysis and other bygone beasts seemingly come to life as you approach. Watch out for the dilophosaurus—sometimes they spit.

This exhibit features 10 realistic, life-sized, animatronic creatures representing seven species that move and call. In addition, a tyrannosaurus rex has made itself at home out front. Strike a pose for a great photo op. Inside the aquarium, watch for a baby t. rex display and a dinosaur nest with eggs. In the Fossil Hunt area, pretend to be a paleontologist and help uncover a dinosaur skeleton in the sand. Don't miss this; the dinosaurs go extinct again after Labor Day.

Way-back Wednesdays. Throughout the summer enjoy programs, crafts, animal encounters, a stingray feeding and even a quiz game featuring animals we see today, such as alligators and sea turtles, that are living links to counterparts of the prehistoric past. The new Ancient Seas exhibit expands on the same theme. The Wednesday activities and the dinosaur exhibit are free with admission or membership.

Winging It. Bring the flock for family fun with "Winging It—Birds in Flight" this summer. This ticketed program stars native raptors and water birds, some of which soar overhead in Big Rock Theater in response to commands. The show highlights the unique features of various owls, hawks, pelicans, vultures and other species while the audience enjoys extraordinary close encounters with these engaging creatures.

The 2014 program uses the fun premise of a field trip with a wildlife biologist and an absent-minded intern to illuminate environmental issues that trouble these species, and solutions that can be incorporated into everyday life. All the birds in the show have injuries or conditions that prevent their release into the wild.

Winging It—Birds in Flight runs daily at 1 p.m. in Big Rock Theater. Tickets are \$4 in addition to admission for ages 3 and up. Purchase tickets at admissions. There is no charge for infants-in-arms ages 2 and under.

Information provided by the North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores. The three North Carolina aquariums and Jeannette's Pier are administered by the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources and are designed to inspire appreciation and conservation of North Carolina's aquatic environments. For more information, log onto ncaquariums.com, or call 800-832-FISH.



Fourth of July Parade
Garner Park @ 10 a.m.

Decorate anything that moves!

Ice-cold watermelon to quench your thirst afterwards