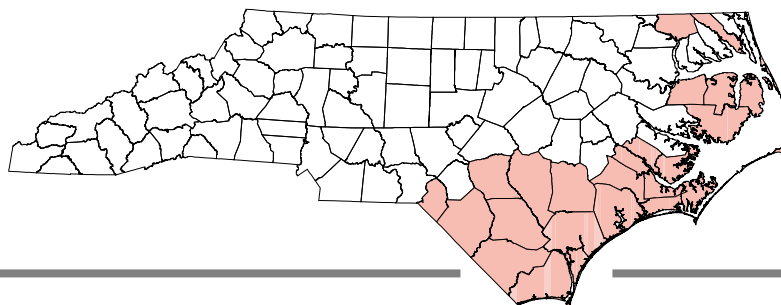

American alligator

Alligator mississippiensis

Threatened S/A (June 4, 1987)



Description: This large, aquatic reptile is rough backed with a broad rounded snout. Most adults are 6-12 ft (1.8-3.7 m) long with brown to dark brown coloration. The young are marked with yellow bands. Often mistaken for the American crocodile, which has narrower jaw with the fourth tooth exposed while the jaws are closed, the American alligator's fourth tooth fits into a notch in the upper jaw and is not exposed.

Life History: Alligators eat anything of a suitable size including mammals, reptiles, amphibians, fish, birds, and crustaceans. Sexual maturity is reached in 10-12 years in the northern part of its range and at approximately 6 ft in length. Nests are constructed near water in late spring and summer. The nests are made from vegetation, debris, and soil mounded to greater than 2 ft high and 6 ft across. Eggs are laid in a cavity near the top of the nest and covered with 6-7 inches of vegetation. Clutch size averages between 35-40 eggs with a maximum of 60. The eggs are usually guarded by the female.

Habitat: Slow-moving coastal rivers, canals, lakes, impoundments, marshes, and estuaries. In southern parts of the state, alligators sometimes inhabit cypress ponds in flatwoods and sandhills. Minimum home range for an adult male averages 3100 acres and for an adult female, 21 acres. Tolerance for salinity increases with age.

Distribution: Alligators range from the southern shore of Albemarle Sound and southward, through the eastern and southern coastal plain. Found in Bladen*, Brunswick, Camden*, Carteret, Columbus, Craven, Cumberland*, Dare, Duplin*, Gates*, Hyde, Jones*, New Hanover, Onslow, Pamlico*, Pender, Robeson, Sampson*, Scotland*, Tyrrell*, and Washington counties.

Threats: Threatened due to similarity of appearance to other protected crocodylians. Alligators are no longer biologically threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act, but commercial hunting and trade are regulated. Overhunting and illegal poaching in the 1950s and 1960s greatly reduced their numbers. Excessive exploitation and habitat loss also resulted from human encroachment.

Management Recommendations: Controlling habitat destruction and exploitation appears to be effective in conserving the species.

* No record has been reported in this county in the past 20 years.

Sources: Martof et al. 1980; Palmer and Braswell 1977, 1995; USFWS 1992a

