

Alligators on Edisto Beach

General Description

There are about 100,000 American alligators living in South Carolina. They live in lakes, ponds, and wetlands, and feed in salt marshes and marine ecosystems. You may even see them on Edisto Beach!

Alligators will spend their time in fresh water and salt water to feed; however, they do not have salt glands and cannot survive full time in salt water. They must find fresh water to purge themselves of the salt levels in their bodies.

Alligators remain in salt marshes and marine habitats longer when there is a spring tide (these are tides just after a new or full moon) because there are more fish and crustaceans available then. Alligators are carnivorous and prey on any animal available. Juvenile alligators (less than 4 feet long) eat small fish, crickets, snails, and crustaceans. Sub-adults (4-6 ft) eat fish, small mammals, crustaceans, and birds. Adults (greater than 6 ft) eat fish, mammals, turtles, birds, and other gators.



Photo by Ken Tingman

Alligators are cold-blooded animals and rely on external heat to warm their bodies. They are most active at 82-92 degrees Fahrenheit, stop feeding when it's below 70 °F, and become dormant below 55 °F.

How fast do alligators grow?

- Alligators hatch at about 9 inches and within one year most have reached 1.5 feet.
- On average, males grow about 8 inches/year and females about 6 inches/year until they reach 6 feet, which translates to about 1 foot every 2 years.

- Alligators greater than 6 feet have a reduced growth rate of about 2.5 inches/year, which translates to about 1 foot every 5 years.

Sexual maturity and reproduction among alligators is dependent on size.

- Alligators reach sexual maturity around 6-7 feet.
- It can take alligators anywhere from 9-16 years before they are able to contribute to the population.

Interesting Facts

Alligators can live up to 40-60 years in the wild and can live even longer in captivity!

You don't need to see an alligator's entire body to estimate their size! Estimate the number of inches from between the eyes to between the nostrils, and that roughly translates to the total length in feet.

The average weight of a 3-foot alligator is less than 4 pounds. A 4-ft alligator averages about 11 lb, while 5-ft alligators average about 22 lb.

How old are alligators? Guess the age based on size!

Cautions

- Do not feed or harass alligators – it's against the law!
- Adult alligators are most dangerous in water or at the edge of water. Keep pets and children away at a safe distance (at least 60 ft).
- They are more scared of you than you are of them!
- If an alligator approaches you, run away in a straight line; not zig zag.
- Mother alligators can be extremely protective of their young and can be aggressive, so if you see young alligators, their mother is likely nearby. You should move away.
- Be smart!

Source: South Carolina Department of Natural Resources <https://dnr.sc.gov> (2025)