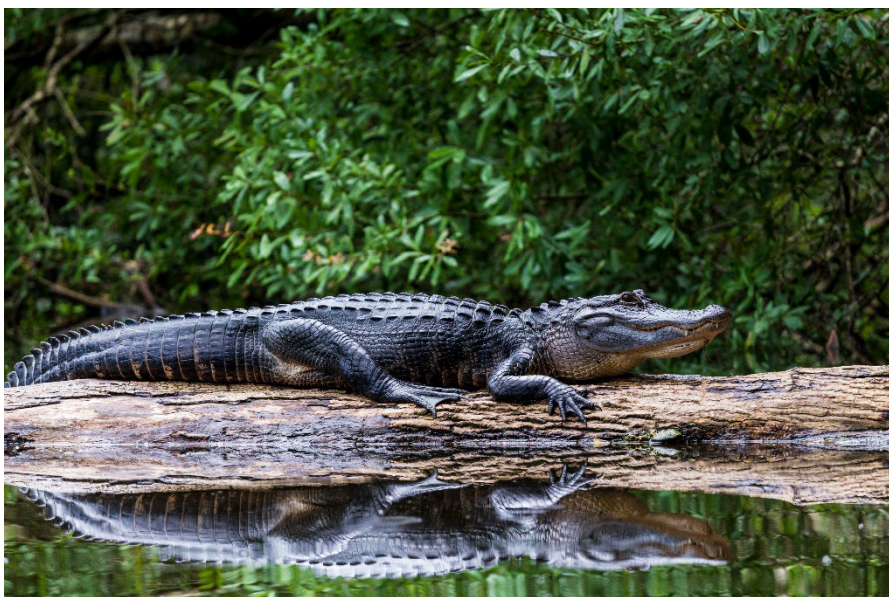


Preventing and addressing conflicts with alligators



JOE PEARL PHOTOGRAPHY/ISTOCK.COM

Found in only 10 southeastern U.S. states, American alligators play an integral role in strengthening wetland ecosystems by keeping aquatic animal populations balanced and creating habitat for fish and wildlife. Alligators dig “gator holes” that hold water when wetlands dry, allowing numerous types of animals to survive, making alligators a “keystone species.”

As demand for housing increases, wetlands are being drained for development, displacing alligators and ultimately causing a greater number of sightings and conflicts. At the same time, communities build habitats that attract alligators, particularly those with ponds, lakes, reservoirs and other water features.

Simply seeing an alligator is no cause for concern. Alligators typically avoid and are afraid of people, but provoking alligators can lead them to defend themselves (and can be illegal). The best thing to do if you encounter an alligator is to not approach, give them space (at least 30 feet or more) and let them pass through.

Avoiding swimming and eating in areas where alligators live and removing attractants from your yard will go a long way toward reducing conflicts with them.

Alligators in the backyard

It’s not uncommon for an alligator to pass through a yard or be found near swimming pools, especially in areas close to wetlands. Alligators may visit or transit through yards in search of food, water or shelter. If left alone, alligators will typically move on to areas away from people, often within a few hours.

To prevent conflicts, be sure to remove any potential attractants in your yard. Secure garbage and food sources, and eliminate clutter around your yard to prevent an alligator from seeking temporary shelter within these structures. If you have an unfenced pool, consider building a sturdy cover or enclosure to discourage their presence.

Exclusionary devices, such as electric fences, may also be used to keep alligators from wandering onto your property. Chain-link or wire fencing should be buried 2 feet into the soil to prevent digging and be angled outward at the top to prevent climbing. Wooden or aluminum fencing is another great alternative as alligators cannot climb against these smooth surfaces.

Alligators in the road

Seeing an alligator on the road is fairly uncommon depending on where you live; however, if you do see one, simply let the alligator pass through or call local authorities to report the situation if necessary. Do not attempt to move the alligator.

Alligators in ponds, lakes, marshes and swamps

Alligators can be found in almost any type of wetland, including ponds, lakes, rivers, canals, swamps and marshes. In general, watch for alligators if you are recreating or working near any of these water sources, and do not swim outside of posted swimming areas.

Alligators are opportunistic feeders, meaning they consume almost anything edible they come across—fish, birds, turtles and more, including any human food or garbage left unattended. Dispose of food scraps in garbage cans, and don't feed other animals (fish, ducks or turtles) in areas that may contain alligators. Never intentionally or unintentionally feed an alligator; animals regularly fed by people may begin to associate people with food.

Females can become defensive around their nests or young; however, they typically first give warning signs by hissing while approaching a potential intruder. Be sure to look out for potential alligator nests and avoid disturbing them.

If an alligator attacks

Alligators are not usually aggressive toward humans. Keeping a careful watch near alligator habitat and maintaining distance is the best way to avoid conflict. Alligators can respond quickly to stimulus, are fast swimmers and can run with bursts of incredible speed. If an alligator tries to chase you, run away in a straight line, not in a zigzag pattern. In the worst-case scenario, if you are bitten, the best thing to do is fight back—try to strike their nose hard—and roll with the alligator (rather than pull away). Seek immediate medical attention if bitten by an alligator or if hit or scratched by their tail.



NATURE AND SCIENCE/ALAMY

Alligators and pets

Alligators may view dogs and cats as prey. Pets should always be kept on a 6-foot leash, walked far from the water's edge and basking alligators, and should not be allowed to swim in or drink from bodies of water that may contain alligators. This is especially important at night, when alligators may be active but less visible, and during nesting season.

Alligators and farm animals

It's uncommon for alligators to prey on farm animals other than domestic fowl. However, in rural areas, large alligators near where animals are being kept may take foals, goats, hogs or occasionally cattle. Exclusionary fencing is a great way to ensure farm animals are kept safe from a potential alligator encounter.



MARK KOSTICH/ISTOCK.COM