

## Everglades National Park Podcast – Glades Glimpse Video Series



Transcript: *Alligator Tales*  
Produced: May 2008

(Music)

Watching the American alligators in Everglades National Park lay around all day, you may think that this creature must be calm, subdued, and possibly fake. But don't let this large creature fool you—it is one of the toughest animals on Earth!

In the park, males commonly reach lengths of 10 feet long and females will reach 8 feet long with each weighing several hundred pounds. Being on the top of the food chain, alligators are opportunistic and will eat anything they can catch including birds, turtles, fish, amphibians, and mammals. Alligators can not chew or cut their food so they will swallow their food whole. If the prey is too large, they will hold the prey with their sharp teeth and jaws for hours crushing the bones repeatedly until it can be swallowed. The strength or force of the alligator's jaw can be over 2,000 pounds—that would be like trying to lift a small car. Inside their powerful jaws, alligators have 40 teeth on the top and 40 teeth on the bottom jaw. If you could imagine biting into the shell of a turtle, you may think that the alligator would need to visit a dentist! But the teeth are hollow and will easily fall out when broken allowing new teeth to grow in.

Visiting the park, you may notice that the alligators seem to just lie around all day and they may not look very tough. During the day, alligators spend most of their time basking in the sun. Being cold-blooded, alligators do not need to eat frequently and will only eat about once or twice a week when temperatures are above 73° F. The food allows the alligator to grow while the alligator regulates its body temperature by the surrounding environment. The tough armored scales or scutes on their back collect the warmth of the sun which warms the blood in their bodies. When the alligator gets too warm, it may open its mouth or slip into the water to cool off. These scutes are very tough and help to protect the alligator from injury.

Alligators have not always had a strong population in Florida. Starting in the 1850's, alligators were hunted for their hides. Over ten million alligators were slaughtered from 1870 – 1965 to be made into purses, belts, luggage, and shoes. By the 1960's it was obvious the American alligator's numbers were dropping quickly towards extinction. In 1967, it was protected as an endangered species. Since its protection, the alligator has made a strong comeback. In 1987, the American alligator was able to be delisted, but today is still protected due to its similarity in appearance to the endangered American crocodile.

November through April is the dry season and American alligators are a common sight in some parts of the park. Shark Valley (in the northern section of the park) and the Anhinga Trail at Royal Palm are two areas where they are very commonly seen. As the water levels continue to drop, alligators will travel to deeper water. In the spring when the rain returns during the wet season, the alligators will spread out to marshes to their territories.

As the temperatures begin to rise in the spring, male alligators will begin to look for mates. {play sound} Their low rumbling bellows may sound terrifying to us, but males use it to warn other males of his territory and to attract females. In mid-June to July, the female will build a nest mound out of sawgrass, cattails, and other debris where she will lay her eggs. Biologists who have studied the alligators in Everglades National Park report that the female lays only about 22 eggs. The temperature of the egg determines whether it will be male or female. Eggs over 91°F will develop into males, eggs below 85°F will become females, and eggs in between 85-91 could develop into either male or female. The young gators hatch in August or September and are 8-9 inches long. Mom will be diligent in protecting her young. The babies will grunt to tell mom where they are. If the babies are threatened, they utter a distress call and mom will quickly respond hissing and ready to attack any predators that threaten her young.

Remember alligators are very powerful and strong animals. Always stay at least 15 feet from all wildlife but especially alligators. Despite that the alligator may look like it is sleeping, they always need their space. Alligators can move very quickly in short bursts reaching at least 10 mph. It is illegal to feed animals in the park and illegal to feed alligators in the state of Florida. Alligators that are fed lose their fear of humans and will start to associate people with food.

(Music)