

Name: _____

Can You Tell a 'Gator From a Croc?

by Guy Belleranti

Look closely at the reptiles pictured below. Can you tell which one is the crocodile and which is the alligator?



Many people confuse crocodiles and alligators, and it's no wonder - the two animals are closely related. However, if you know a few facts about each animal, I think you'll be able to tell them apart.

First, let's examine how the two creatures are alike.

- Both crocodiles and alligators are large, 4-legged reptiles that live primarily in warm tropical swamps and rivers.
- Both have good eyesight and good night vision. Having their eyes on the top of their head helps them see prey when they're swimming underwater.
- Both have a special additional eyelid called a nictitating membrane. This clear eyelid keeps their eyes moist and clean. Since it is clear, crocs and gators can see through this eyelid even when it's closed.
- Both have excellent hearing and senses of smell. Their ears and nostrils have flaps that close when they dive underwater.
- How long can alligators and crocodiles stay underwater? While they usually stay under for a half hour or less, they can hold their breath much longer. Alligators and crocodiles can spend two hours or more underwater while resting.
- Both animals have huge, powerful tails that help them swim and fight predators. But the tails serve another function as well. Their tails store fat that can be used for nourishment when food is scarce.

- Mother alligators and crocodiles guard their eggs and take good care of their hatchlings. Most other reptiles, including turtles and snakes, lay their eggs and move on. They do not watch after or care for their young like alligators and crocodiles do.

While these facts may be interesting, they're not helping you determine which picture is the alligator and which one is the crocodile. To help you tell them apart, let's discuss how these two animals are different.

- While both are crocodylians, they are in different groups or families. In fact, there are three families of crocodylians. There's an alligator family, which includes alligators and caiman. There's also a crocodile family. And there's a third group called gharials, which are an endangered group of crocodylians from India.
- Alligators and caiman have u-shaped, rounded snouts. Crocodile snouts are more pointed and v-shaped. Gharial snouts are very long and slender. In fact, the gharial's snout is so slender that it can only catch and eat fish. Alligators and crocodiles eat all sorts of animals.

Since you're probably wondering what a gharial looks like, here's a picture:



As you can see, it's neither an alligator nor crocodile, but in a group all its own. Its snout is very thin, so it can't catch and eat large, strong animals like alligators and crocodiles can.

It is estimated that only 5,000 or so gharials are alive in the world today.

- An alligator's wider upper jaw overlaps its lower jaw when it closes its mouth. Because of this its teeth don't show. A crocodile's upper and lower jaw, however, are about the same width. So when a crocodile closes its mouth some of its teeth still show.
- While many crocodiles live in freshwater, some also live in saltier sea water. The largest crocodylian of all, the Estuarine Crocodile of Australia and Asia, is an example of a species that can be found in both fresh and saltwater. Alligators are found only in freshwater habitats.

Look back at the two pictures on the first page. Now that you know your crocodylians, you should be able to tell which picture is the croc and which one's the 'gator. To the left, you see an American Alligator. (You can tell by the shape of its snout.) To the right, a Saltwater Crocodile.

About the Author

Guy Belleranti works as a docent at Reid Park Zoo in Tucson, Arizona. The information in this article comes from his experiences working with animals and teaching others.

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2. Crocodiles live...

- a. only in saltwater b. only in freshwater
c. in both saltwater and freshwater d. only in India

3. According to the article, how are mother alligators and crocodiles different from mother turtles and snakes?

4. Explain what a nictitating membrane is and what it does?

5. Tell whether each fact about gharials is true or false.

_____ Gharials live in South America.

_____ Gharials are an endangered species.

_____ Gharials are a type of alligator.

_____ Gharials only eat fish.

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Match each vocabulary word from the article to its definition.

- | | |
|----------------------|---|
| _____ 1. confuse | a. thin, skinny |
| _____ 2. prey | b. long nose and jaws of an animal's head |
| _____ 3. nourishment | c. measure of how wide something is |
| _____ 4. hatchlings | d. mix up |
| _____ 5. caiman | e. things that must be eaten for growth and health |
| _____ 6. slender | f. animal that is hunted and eaten |
| _____ 7. snout | g. organs in the body that secrete liquid chemicals |
| _____ 8. width | h. animals that have recently hatched from eggs |
| _____ 9. glands | i. layer of skin or tissue that protects body parts |
| _____ 10. membrane | j. type of animal similar to an alligator |

ANSWER KEY

Can You Tell a 'Gator From a Croc?

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1. Correctly label each picture as an alligator, a crocodile, or a gharial.



crocodile



gharial



alligator

2. Crocodiles live...
- a. only in saltwater
 - b. only in freshwater
 - c. in both saltwater and freshwater
 - d. only in India
3. According to the article, how are mother alligators and crocodiles different from mother turtles and snakes?

Mother alligators and crocodiles watch over and protect their young.

4. Explain what a nictitating membrane is and what it does?

A nictitating membrane is a clear eyelid. It cleans and moistens the eyes of alligators and crocodiles. It also allows them to see underwater.

5. Tell whether each fact about gharials is true or false.

false Gharials live in South America.

true Gharials are an endangered species.

false Gharials are a type of alligator.

true Gharials only eat fish.

ANSWER KEY

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Match each vocabulary word from the article to its definition.

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f 2. prey

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a 6. slender

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a. thin, skinny

b. long nose and jaws of an animal's head

c. measure of how wide something is

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e. things that must be eaten for growth and health

f. animal that is hunted and eaten

g. organs in the body that secrete liquid chemicals

h. animals that have recently hatched from eggs

i. layer of skin or tissue that protects body parts

j. type of animal similar to an alligator