

Living with Alligators & Venomous Snakes at Florida Polytechnic University

Alligators

Living or working near a body of fresh water in Florida that does not have alligators is just not realistic. Alligators are a part of the natural order here and are quite common in most of Florida's lakes, rivers and streams. Even the best efforts at keeping a body of water "gator-free" are guaranteed to be short lived. Why? because Alligators get up and relocate, especially during the summer mating season. Alligator populations in and around Florida's lakes, rivers and streams continue to grow at a healthy rate. Combine an increasing alligator population with an increasing human population, and it's easy to see that alligator-to-human encounters will continue to increase. The vast majority of alligators one may come across down here are less than 6 feet in length, but gators in the 8 ft. to 10 ft. class are not uncommon. Male alligators tend to grow larger than females.

Stay Safe around Alligators

Alligators and Floridians usually have a peaceful coexistence, but there are recorded attacks and occasional fatalities. The key to staying safe is being alert to the possibility of alligators being present. **Never feed gators** or swim or wade in waters where large alligators are known or likely to occur, especially at dusk or night (when they naturally feed).

It's very important to **keep children and pets away from the water's edge** wherever alligators are likely to be present. **Do not allow dogs to swim or explore waters that are known to have alligators** because dogs look like prey to alligators. There are far more alligator attacks on dogs than on humans. An alligator's prey selection seems based mostly on size of the potential prey animal, not so much on a keen recognition of specific animals as prey or non-prey.

Laws protecting Alligators

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) lists alligators as a species *threatened due to similarity of appearance*, which specifically refers to the similarity between alligators and the endangered American crocodile. **It is illegal to feed or harass alligators in Florida.**

Common Misconceptions about Alligators:

Myth #1. You should run zigzag if you come across an alligator.

This is a common misconception. First, it is rare for an alligator to pursue a human because humans are too large to be suitable prey. However, if an alligator does make an aggressive charge, run fast and straight (away from the alligator, of course). They usually do not run very far. But remember they are most likely to charge at you if you are near their nest.

Myth #2. Alligators have poor eyesight.

Alligators actually have very good eyesight, which is an important adaptation for hunting. They are especially adapted to see and sense movement of potential prey animals. The position of their eyes on their head (almost on the side) gives them a wide sight range. The only place they cannot see is right behind them.

Myth #3. Alligators are not good climbers.

Alligators have sharp claws and powerful tails to help them push their bodies up. Young alligators are agile climbers and adults have been known to climb fences to get to water or escape captivity. Low fences, therefore, may not be sufficient protection in areas where alligators are present.

Venomous Snakes

Florida is home to 46 species of native snakes, six of which are venomous (snakes are not poisonous—"poisonous" refers to something that is toxic when ingested). The venomous species include five pit vipers (eastern diamondback rattlesnake, timber rattlesnake, pygmy rattlesnake, copperhead, and cottonmouth) and the coral snake. Copperheads and timber rattlesnakes have a limited range in Florida. Copperheads only occur in a small area of Florida's Panhandle just west of Tallahassee, and timber rattlesnakes are only found in northern Florida as far south as Gainesville. The other four venomous species are found throughout the state. Florida's venomous snakes occur in a variety of natural habitats, ranging from swamps to dry woods.

Although each of the six venomous species in Florida have unique characteristics that allow them to be readily identified by experts, there are many non-venomous species with which the venomous species may be confused. Therefore, it is best not to attempt to capture, harass, or harm any snake. Doing so may put you at risk of being bitten by a venomous species.

Cottonmouth/Water Moccasin

The cottonmouth is the most aquatic of Florida's venomous snakes and occurs throughout the state. Although they may exceed five feet in length, most adult cottonmouths observed are about three feet long. This species prefers the margins of lakes, rivers, and wetlands. Adults are dark-colored and may have a faint crossband pattern or be a uniform black. The eye is camouflaged by a broad, dark facial band that runs from the eye to the back of the head.

As a defensive response when threatened, cottonmouths often open their mouths wide, revealing the cotton-white interior. Young cottonmouths are brightly colored with reddish-brown crossbands and a yellow-colored tail. When young they look very similar to the copperhead, and are sometimes confused as such.

Several species of harmless water snakes are often mistaken as cottonmouths. Water snakes are not venomous but they tend to be aggressive and quick to bite. To avoid confusion and the potential for being bitten, it is best to leave all water snakes alone.

Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake

Diamondbacks are very dangerous snakes and should not be approached. The eastern diamondback rattlesnake is Florida's largest venomous snake and may exceed six feet in length. It occurs throughout Florida in a variety of dry habitats, such as pinelands, scrub, and golf courses.

Eastern diamondback rattlesnakes have bold markings down their backs that include a row of large, dark diamonds with brown centers and cream-colored borders. The tail ends in a rattle that is used to make a loud buzzing sound when the snake feels threatened. Some individuals may not rattle, even when they are poised to strike. The large, thick head has a light-bordered, dark facial band running diagonally through the eye to the rear of the jaw. The scales of this species are strongly keeled (i.e., there is a ridge along the center of each scale), giving these snakes a rough appearance. The young are similar to adults in color pattern.

Conclusion:

Bottom line is that Alligators and Venomous Snakes are creatures to be respected and understood, and if you come across one that does not seem to be bothered by your presence, stay clear of it and report it to safetyservices@floridapoly.edu