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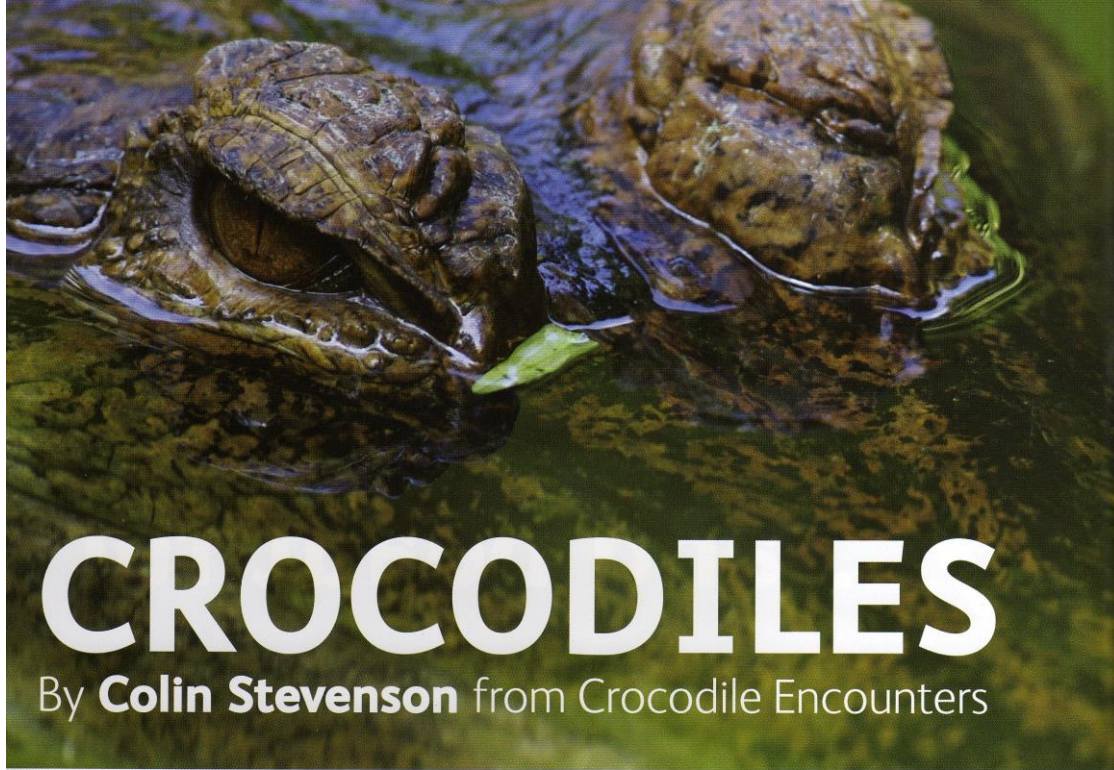
CROCODILES

Snap up the facts in our fascinating article

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CROCODILES

By **Colin Stevenson** from Crocodile Encounters

I like crocodiles – they’re even older than the dinosaurs, totally fascinating and just a little scary.

From the huge saltwater crocodiles of Australia and Asia to South America’s smaller dwarf caiman, there are 23 species of crocodiles, alligators, caimans and gharials alive today. Together we call them crocodylians and they float about the rivers and swamps of every tropical region on Earth. Crocodylians first emerged more than 200 million years ago and are still the dominant aquatic predators within the tropics.

Water’s edge predators

When a crocodile closes its powerful jaws, its teeth settle into notches outside the jaw with the huge interlocking teeth still visible. When an alligator closes its mouth, the top jaw overlaps the bottom

one, leaving just the top teeth visible, giving a slightly buck-toothed appearance. This is a good way to tell them apart. Crocodiles have no need for a dentist because they replace their teeth continually as they wear out, chip or break. All this adds up to mean that a crocodile’s teeth have the most powerful bite on the planet today – so steer clear.

Imagine you’re near the edge of a murky river in northern Australia. In that water, a five-metre long saltwater crocodile could be watching you and all you would see are a few bumps sticking out of the water. Those bumps are the eyes, ears and nose of the crocodile. This means it can see, hear, smell and breathe even though most of its body is hidden under the water. By hiding like this, a crocodile can get very close without its victim knowing – and because they’re very patient, they will wait all day for prey to come along.



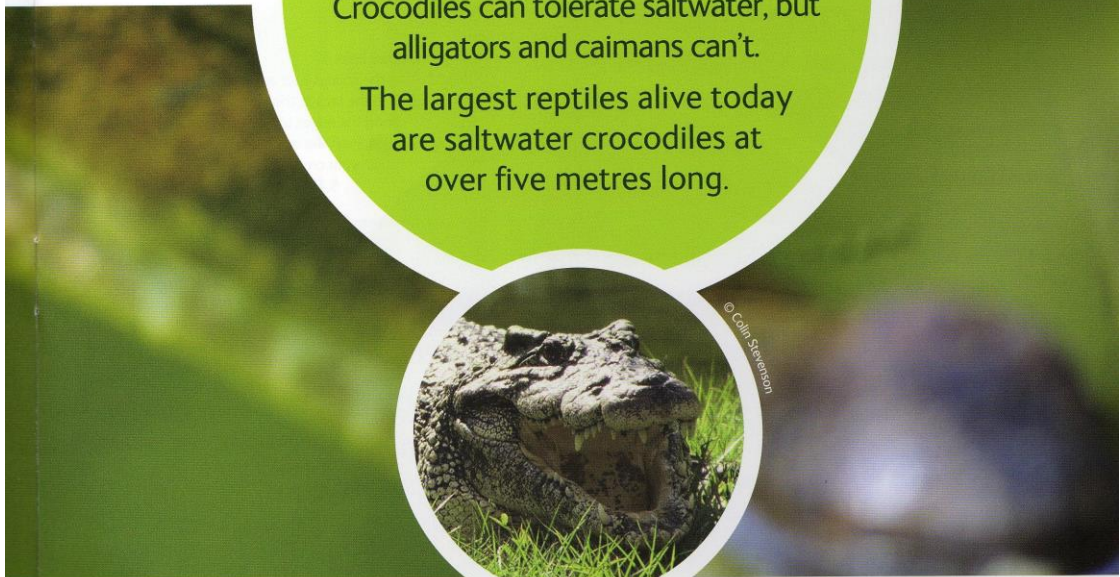
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DID YOU KNOW?

The smallest crocodiles are dwarf caimans, at 1.2–1.5 metres long.

Crocodiles can tolerate saltwater, but alligators and caimans can't.

The largest reptiles alive today are saltwater crocodiles at over five metres long.



© Colin Stevenson

If the crocodile goes under the water, its slow metabolism and some very clever changes to its blood circulation mean it can stay there for a long time. Some large crocodiles can stay under the water for hours, even though they breathe air, like people do.

Lazing in the water?

A slow metabolism doesn't mean a crocodile is lazy, it just means they don't run around all day. Having a slow metabolism also means crocodiles don't need to eat every day, unlike us. They are relaxed and energy-efficient animals, using the heat of the sun to keep their body ticking over. However, when a crocodile is hungry, or at the first sign of danger, it can produce explosive power, propelling itself almost entirely out of the water. This power is short-lived and long fights or struggles with other crocodiles can be fatal.

Motherhood

Considering the power in those massive jaws, crocodile mums delicately carry their newly hatched young down to the water in their jaws even gently cracking open unhatched eggs to help the baby inside emerge. However, try and grab one of these babies and you'd feel exactly how strong mum's jaws are.

Mum or Dad will look after their babies for the first few weeks of their lives. And did you know the temperature within the nest determines whether the eggs will develop into boys or girls?

We are still learning about these amazing animals.

The more we learn, the more respect we have for crocodiles and the more respect we have, the more we will do to ensure they continue to live safely and maintain their dominance in the tropical waters on Earth.

Gator Aid

Six of the 23 species of crocodylians face a tough future.

Indian gharials are very endangered. There are only about 200 adults in the wild.

Chinese alligators were down to fewer than 150 in the wild (although they are now enjoying good conservation efforts).



How to make your very own crocodile

You will need a sheet of paper or thin card, scissors, scalpel and glue.

CLUE: Match the shaded areas – which need to be glued – to the letters.

1. Pull out this page and stick it on to your sheet of paper or thin card.
2. Cut out each piece of the crocodile along the solid lines.

TOP TIP: Using a ruler can help you keep a straight line when scoring along a long dotted line.

To make the body

1. Score (with the point of your scissors) along the dotted lines.
2. Use a scalpel to cut along the four slits.
IMPORTANT: Get an adult to help you with this.
3. Fold in the side pieces marked E and F and curve the body into a semi-circle. Glue tabs A and fix to the underside of the corners marked with an A.

To make the legs

1. Score along the dotted lines.
2. Feed the legs through the slots in the crocodile's body. Make sure each piece has the longer ends facing towards E.
3. Glue tabs B and C and bend them round to the area marked B and C to make a tube.
4. Fold out the triangular pieces to make the claws and bend each leg under along the scored lines.

To make the head

1. Score along the dotted lines.
2. Fold along the scored lines and glue tab D to D.
3. Fold in the tabs at the front of the head and glue along the edges to create the mouth.
4. Push the teeth inside the mouth to give your crocodile bite.
5. Fold in the tabs E and glue them to the crocodile's body at E.

To make the tail

1. Score along the dotted lines on both tail pieces.
2. Glue the tabs G (on Tail 2) to the underside of the area marked G on Tail 1.
3. Fold in the tabs F on Tail 1 and glue them to the crocodile's body at F.

NGW: Send us a photo of your crocodile and you will be entered into a prize draw to win a Nile crocodile cuddly toy. Please send your photo to members@rhn.ac.uk