

Meet Mother Alligator

Activity: Swamp Denizen

Different animals are suited to living in different environments. The alligator is the master of the swamp – a carnivore at the top of the food chain. Here are some quick facts about this large reptile:

- + Alligators start their life cycle in a soft-shelled egg. Unlike birds, alligator parents do not sit on their eggs; they rely on the sun and other environmental factors to keep their eggs warm.
- + Alligator mothers lay 35-50 eggs on a nest of vegetation and covered by more vegetation to keep warm.
- + For the first two years of their lives, baby alligators are taken care of by their mothers. They live in small groups called pods.
- + Baby alligators grow about a foot per year.
- + American alligators live about 50 years in the wild.
- + After they are 4 feet long, alligators are safe from predators, as they are the biggest carnivore in their habitat.
- + Alligators are cold-blooded, which means they need to seek out warmth from their environment to survive.
- + Alligators have webbed feet.
- + Alligators have about 75 teeth in their mouths at any one time, but as the teeth wear down or break off, they are replaced. As a result, many individual alligators can have about 3,000 teeth throughout their lives.
- + Alligators are carnivores who eat fish, snails, birds, frogs and mammals.

Make your own alligator at home out of common household materials!

Materials:

Two egg cartons, scissors, a pencil or BBQ skewer, eight twist ties, a black marker, white construction paper, and tape. Optional: green and brown paint or markers

Directions:



Cut across one carton to separate four egg cups.

Trim off the sides and edges. This is the head of the alligator.





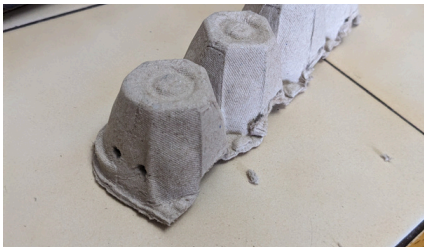
With a pencil point, poke four holes in the bend of the head.

Turn the uncut carton so that the flat side (what once was the lid) is facing down. This is the body of the alligator. Use the pencil/skewer to poke four holes in one end of the carton.



Open the carton. Slide a twist tie through two of the holes in the head. Push the ends through two of the holes in the body. Twist the ends together on the inside of the body.

Do this with the other two holes in the head and body.



Cut down the middle of the remaining egg cups lengthwise. Trim off the edges from one set of four. This is the tail.

Poke two holes in one end of the tail. Poke two holes in the tail end of the body.



Push a twist tie through the two holes on the inside of the tail. Push the ends through the body holes. Twist the ends together.

On the flat cover of the body, poke two holes where each leg will be.



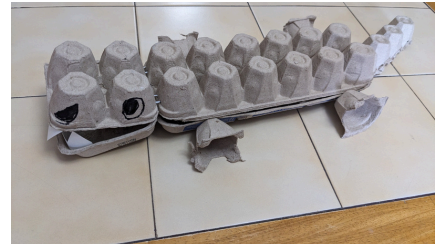
Use one egg cup for each leg, trimming the edges.

Poke two holes in the very bottom of each cup. Push one tie through each leg and into the body hole. Twist the ends together inside the body.





Use a marker to add eyes.
Cut teeth out of the white construction paper and tape them into the mouth.



Optional final step: decorate your alligator with scaly patterns with green and brown paint or markers.

Questions:

1. What characteristics make the alligator good at living in a swamp?
2. Do you think alligators shed their skin? Why or why not?
3. How many years does it take for an alligator to reach 4 feet in length?

Did you know?

When the weather gets cold, alligators dig what's called a 'gator hole' in the mud next to their waterway that they can lie in to stay warm. These tunnels can be as long as 20 meters (65 feet) and provide protection during extreme hot or cold weather. When the alligator is done with its hole, other swamp animals use it as shelter too!

Further Reading:

Smithsonian: American Alligator <https://nationalzoo.si.edu/animals/american-alligator>

Britannica Kids: Alligator <https://kids.britannica.com/kids/article/alligator/352737>