

All About Alligators

Presentation by Paul Pacter



Copyright © Paul Pacter

www.PaulVisits.com

Two parts to our discussion of the American Alligator:



CREW Bird Rookery Swamp

1. Lots of information about alligators.
Size, quantity, location, habitat, appearance, diet, ectothermy, reproduction, social structure, legal status, etc.
2. Where we can see them safely in the Naples area.

I am an accountant. Not a scientist.

- Presentation is in layman's terms.
- Might be a few technical inaccuracies.



Corkscrew Swamp

With one or two exceptions (which I will point out) I took all of the photos.

We'll look at alligators in these places:

- Audubon Corkscrew Swamp.
- Turner River Rd – HP Williams Park.
- Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk.
- Six-Mile Cypress Slough Preserve.
- CREW Bird Rookery Swamp.
- Oasis Visitor Center.
- Naples Zoo.
- Freedom Park.

If time permits, a few more places.

To whet your appetite: Corkscrew Swamp Back Country, Naples, March 24, 2023



Part 1

Lots of Information about Alligators

American Alligator

Scientific name:
Alligator mississippiensis.
Up to 15 feet.
Up to 1,000 lbs.



Big Cypress National Preserve

Live only in SE USA: From East Texas to North Carolina.

Alligators are aquatic, cold-blooded

- Good swimmers.
- Spend time on land, esp. to get warmth from the sun.
- Valves to close ears and nostrils when submerged.
- Can stay under water 45-60 minutes.



Big Cypress Preserve

Size

Weight in the wild (more in captivity)

- Average adult: 790 pounds.
- Some are over 1,000 pounds.
- Males 30% larger than females.
- Largest in Florida: 1,043 pounds.



Length

- Average male adult 11 ft. Female 8 ft.
- Largest in Florida: 14 feet, 4 inches.
- Largest 19.2 feet (Louisiana).

Largest Alligators (Males) Caught in Florida (as of Sept 21, 2023)

#	Year	County	Length	Weight (lbs)
1	2010	Brevard	14' 3 1/2"	654
2	2013	Gadsden and Leon	14' 1"	n/a
3	1997	Volusia	14' 5/8"	800
4	1989	Franklin	14' 1/16"	714
5	2001	Polk	13' 11 1/4"	880
6	1989	Marion	13' 10 1/2"	1,043
7	1983	Lake	13' 9 1/4"	870
8	1984	Marion	13' 8"	700
9	2008	Putnam and Flagler	13' 6 1/8"	830
10	2005	Manatee	13' 5 1/8"	800

Female alligators rarely exceed 10 ft length. Largest in Florida:

1	2019	Putnam and Volusia	10' 6 1/8"	n/a
---	------	--------------------	------------	-----

Where Are Gators Found in the US?



How Many Gators in the US?

- Estimated 5,000,000 in Southeast United States.
- Largest populations are in:
 - Florida (1,250,000).
 - Louisiana (1,250,000).
 - Texas (500,000).
 - Georgia (250,000).



Life Expectancy:

- 30-50 years in the wild.
- 60-80 years in human care.

Habitat

Fresh water.

- Prefer lakes, slow-moving rivers, and wetlands (swamps, marshlands, etc).

Low tolerance for salt water.

- But sometimes found in brackish (mixed salt-fresh) water.



Appearance – Color

- Olive-black skin.
- Bony scales (scutes).
- Hatchlings and juveniles are black streaked with pale yellow stripes. Stripes help camouflage. Disappear as adults.



Mobility

- Mainly swimming (natatorial).
- Can move on land by a variety of means: Walk, run (short distances), and even crawl. *Next Slide*
- Tail: A long, powerful tail helps propel alligators through water.
- Webbed rear feet. Help an alligator swim.

Alligator "High Walk"

Tail always drags
Turner River Road



Buoyancy

- Float just under water. Only eyes & nostrils visible.
- Control buoyancy by inflating and deflating lungs.
- Hide, sneak up on prey.
- Special muscles around lungs to help them float, dive, barrel roll.



Generalist Carnivores

Diet – Juveniles

- Begin eating insects after birth.
- Then crayfish, small fish, frogs.
- Then other small animals.

Diet – Adults

- Fish, invertebrates, frogs, birds, mammals.
- If gator is big enough, will eat deer, hogs, bear, etc.

Cannibalistic! Eat other alligators.

Use sharp teeth to capture prey:

- Jaws can crack a large turtle's shell.
- But cannot use jaws to chew. Swallow in chunks.
- Strongest laboratory-measured bite of any living animal.

Eating Habits – Adults:

- Lurkers, not hunters.
- Wait for something edible to swim or walk by. Then lunge!

Alligators Are Ectothermic - Cold Blooded.

- Rely on external sources of heat to control body temperature.
- Regulate body heat by:

- Basking in the sun.
- Digging holes in mud to trap heat.
- Moving to areas with warmer or cooler air or water temperatures.



Alligator Basking at Big Cypress Bend



Dormancy

- Alligators are most active when temperatures are between 82° to 92° F.
- They stop feeding when the temperature drops below 70° F.
- They become dormant below 55° F.
 - This dormancy is called **brumation**. Similar to hibernation of mammals. Heart, metabolic, respiratory rates drop.
- Alligators are dormant throughout much of the winter season. *Less so in SW Fla.*

Alligator Holes

Alligators dig them for 2 reasons:

- Insulation when temperatures drop.
- Pool of water during dry season.

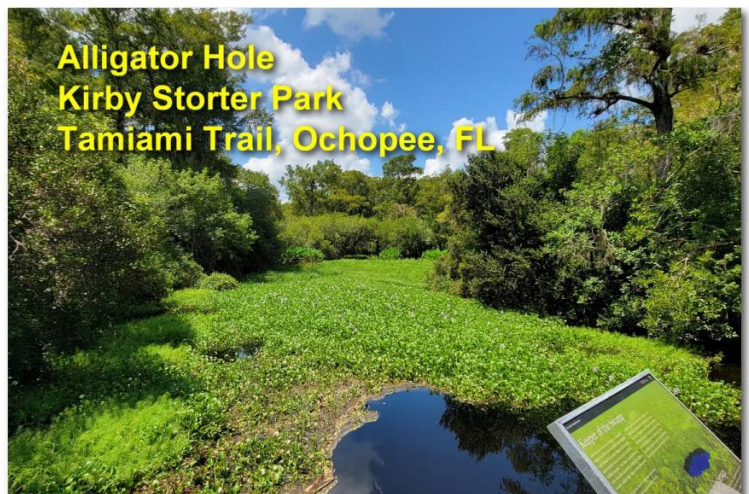
Alligators use their snout and tail to clear muck from base of a pond.

Also dig tunnels up to 65 feet long to protect themselves from extreme heat/cold.

Can stay under water 45 to 60 minutes.

- Up to 24 hours during brumation.

Alligator Hole Kirby Storter Park Tamiami Trail, Ochopee, FL





Alligator just finished digging a water hole due to Spring 2025 drought. Corkscrew Swamp.

Attitude toward humans:

- Become unsettled. Ignore humans. Or walk or swim away.
- Rarely go after a human unprovoked.
- Can outrun human in first 20-30 feet of exiting water.

1948 to 2021: 442 unprovoked gator attacks on humans in Florida:

- 26 fatalities. 277 non-fatal major bites. 139 minor bites. *Over 70 years.*

Do Not Feed Alligators!

It's illegal. Why?

Alligators are wild animals. Naturally afraid of humans. Giving them food only makes them bolder and encourages them to seek out people. Attack for food. Also it alters their natural diet in an unhealthy way.



Do you want to taste alligator?

- Cracklin Jacks, Collier Blvd. →
- Deep Lagoon, US41 at Vanderbilt.
- Alice Sweetwater's, Airport Rd.
- Mudbugs Cajun Kitchen. Sanibel.
- Everglades City Rod & Gun Club.
- Village Pub, Venetian Village, Naples.



Or order on Amazon for a memorable cookout:

Alligator Filets - Farm Raised - Great for Grilling and Frying
\$39.99 for 1 pound



Or get it at Roosters Farm Stand, Route 80, Fort Myers:

\$20 for 1 pound



Elsewhere in the World

Huangsha Market Guangzhou, China



Menu Bangkok, Thailand



Saturday Market Chiang Rai, Thailand



Reproduction

Sexual maturity determined by gator's size (length) rather than age.

Male: 7 feet (ages 8-12).

Female: 6 feet (ages 10-15).

Alligators mate: Once a year.

Normally: April to June.



Alligators Mating
Big Cypress Bend
Green Heron Lake

Nesting

- Female builds nest in vegetation next to water.
- Clutch of 20-50 eggs (average 38).
- Incubation 60-70 days.
- Female stays near nest. Fiercely protective of nest and hatchlings.



Hatchling at Corkscrew Swamp

Hikers be especially cautious!

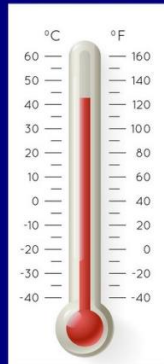


Internet Photo

Sex of offspring

- Temperature in the nest in first 3 weeks after laying eggs determines sex of the offspring.
- Temperatures above 93 degrees will produce males.
- Temperatures of 86 degrees and below produce females.

> 93°F = M
< 86°F = F



Survival

Number of eggs laid by female	38
Number of those that hatch	24
Number of those that live to 1 year	10
Number of those that become sub-adults (> 4 ft long)	8
Number of those that reach maturity (> 6 ft long)	5

Hatchlings Are Born 8 Inches Long

- During the first 4-6 years, gators grow about 1 foot per year (1" a month).
- After 6 years: Males grow around 8 inches/year. Females around 6 inches/year. Until they reach 6 feet.
- At 6 feet, growth slows to about 2.5 inches per year for both sexes.



Juvenile Alligator
Audubon Corkscrew Swamp

Legal status

- By the 1950s: **Almost extinct due to endless hunting.**
- 1966: **Gained protective status under Endangered Species Preservation Act.**
- 1980s: **Population recovered.**
- 1987: **Removed from "endangered" list.**
- Today: **Classified as "vulnerable" due to similar appearance to an endangered animal, namely the crocodile. This allows state regulation of hunting etc.**

Difference	Alligator	Crocodile
Location	SE US Only	Global
Color	Greenish Black	Dull Gray
Snout	Rounded	Pointy



Gator



Croc

Differences	Alligator	Crocodile
Quantity USA	5 million	Only a few thousand
Habitat	Slow moving fresh water	Prefer salt water
When Jaw Is Closed	Only 2 teeth protrude down each side	Many teeth protrude up and down



Fun Fact #1
Alligator Teeth
 American alligators have 70-80 teeth.

- All pointy (no flat like humans).
- As an alligator's teeth wear down or fall out, new ones come in. An alligator can go through 3,000 teeth in a lifetime.
- Over 2,000 pounds per square inch of bite force.



Fun Fact #2
Origin of the Word Alligator
 The word "alligator" is an Anglicized form of el lagarto, the Spanish term for "the lizard". That's what early Spanish explorers and settlers in Florida called the alligator.

Modern Spanish: Aligátor. Caimán. Lagarto.



Fun Fact #3

An alligator's brain weighs only 8 or 9 grams and would take up only one-half of a tablespoon.

Due to lack of brain power, alligators act on instinct, not thought.

If it's hungry, an alligator will eat anything that moves.



Fun Fact #4

Alligators do not have vocal cords.

But can make loud sounds using their throat:

- Open mouth wide and allow air to escape.
- Can hiss, roar, and growl.



Part 2 Some Places Where You Can See Alligators Safely in the Naples Area

We will look at these places:

In the wild:

- Audubon Corkscrew Swamp.
- Turner River Rd – H P Williams Park.
- Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk.
- Six-Mile Cypress Slough Preserve.
- CREW Bird Rookery Swamp.
- Oasis Visitor Center.
- Freedom Park.

In captivity:

- Naples Zoo.

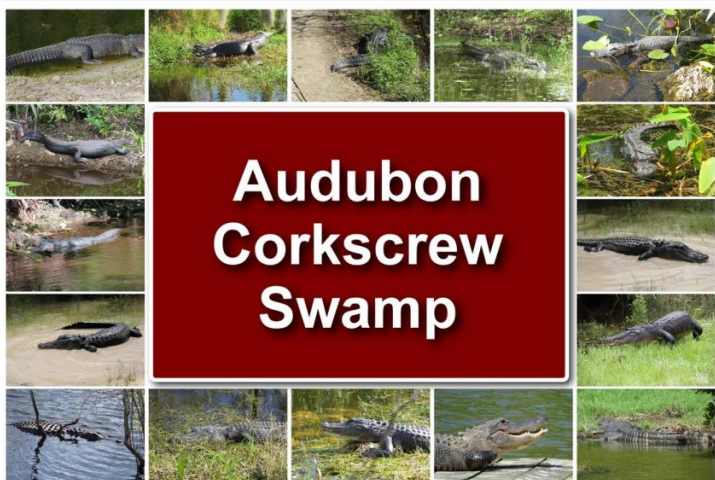


Safety

- Always walk at least 30 feet away from an alligator on a footpath.
- Never bring pets to alligator areas.
- Closely supervise children walking or playing around water that may have alligators.



Audubon Corkscrew Swamp



Audubon Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary
13,000-acre protected wetlands area.

Website: corkscrew.audubon.org/
Where: 375 Sanctuary Rd W, Naples 34120.

Get There: East on Immokalee Road. 15 miles East of I-75, turn left onto Sanctuary Rd. Follow signs.

When: Daily 8:00 am to 3:00 pm.

Admission: \$17. College students \$10. Children 6-14 \$6. Book online.

Several of the Many Birds at Corkscrew Swamp



Ibis



Yellow-crowned Night Heron



Sandhill Crane



Anhinga



Roseate Spoonbill



Barred Owl

Lettuce Lakes at Corkscrew Swamp.

- Shallow ponds.
- Covered with water lettuce plants.
- Full of fish and birds.



Alligator in a Lettuce Lake



Audubon Corkscrew Swamp South Lettuce Lake



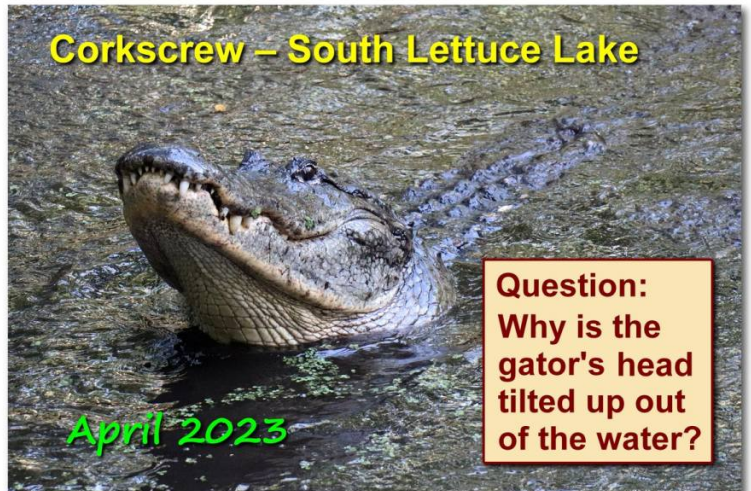
April 2023

Audubon Corkscrew Swamp, Naples South Lettuce Lake



April 29, 2023 12 Newborns

Corkscrew – South Lettuce Lake



April 2023

Question:
Why is the
gator's head
tilted up out
of the water?

Corkscrew Swamp - South Lettuce Lake May 2023



Question:
Why is the
gator's
mouth open?

Corkscrew Swamp December 2024 Between S and N Lettuce Lakes





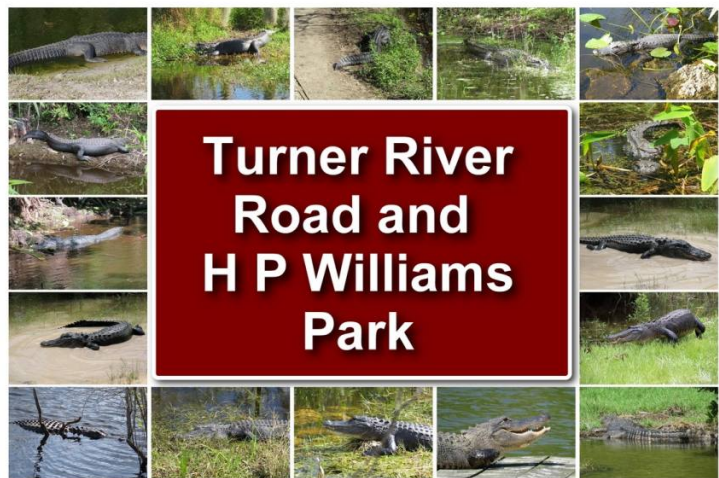
**Corkscrew Swamp
South Lettuce Lake
Mating Season
April 2025
Bellowing**



**Audubon Corkscrew Swamp
Back Country - March 24, 2023**



**Audubon Corkscrew Swamp
Back Country - Naples, Florida**



**Turner River
Road and
H P Williams
Park**

Turner River Rd & H P Williams Park

Websites: hp-williams-roadside-park.htm
and www.nps.gov/bicy/planyourvisit/

Where: Ochopee, Florida.

Get there: US-41 Tamiami Trail 30 miles east of Collier Blvd.

From there: Turner River Road runs 21 miles due north to I-75.

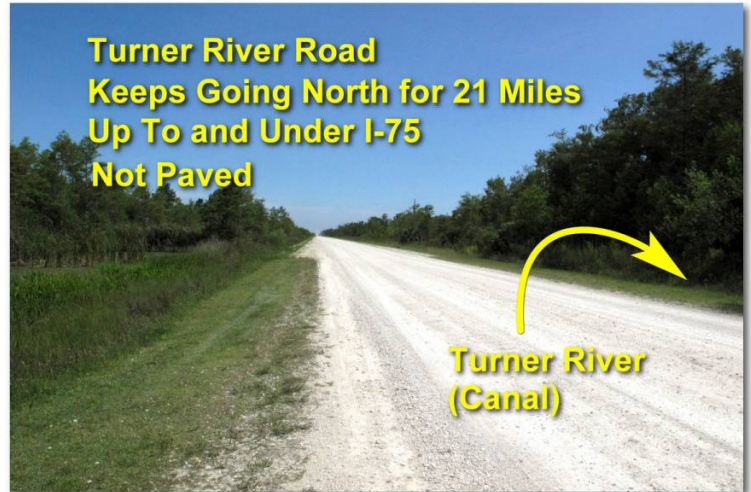
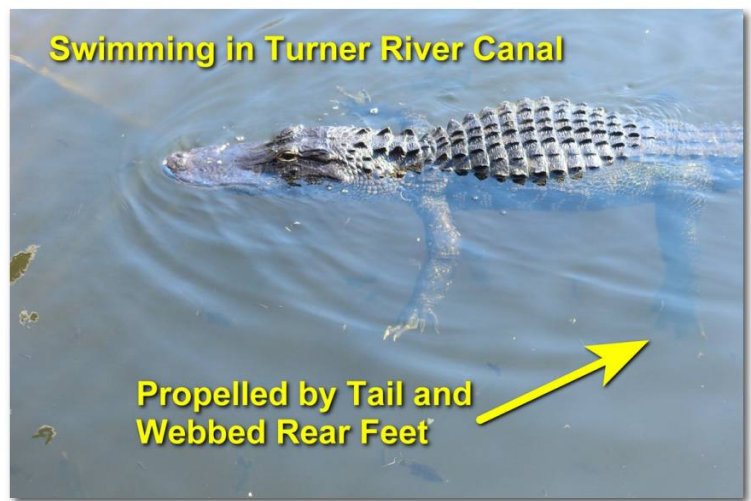
Admission: Free.

What: H P Williams Park boardwalk. Safe viewing of gators swimming.

From there: Can drive north on Turner River Road (unpaved but good) 21 miles to I-75. Canal with gators on the right. Drive first 4 miles is usually enough.

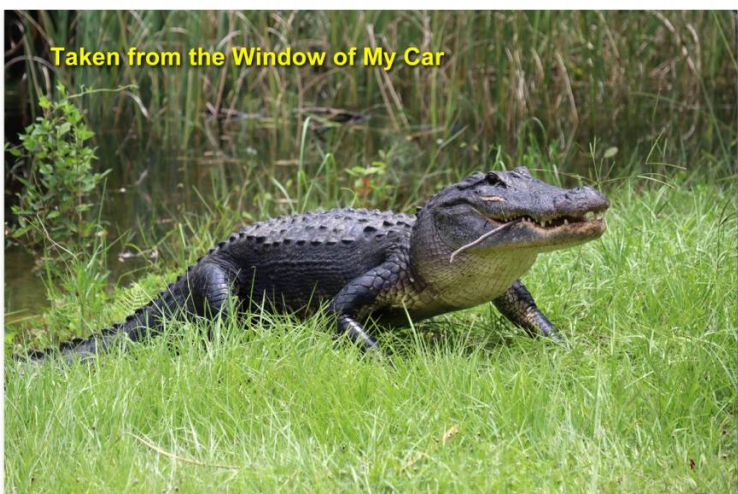
- **Do not feed the gators.**
- **Except at boardwalk, be cautious getting out of car.**

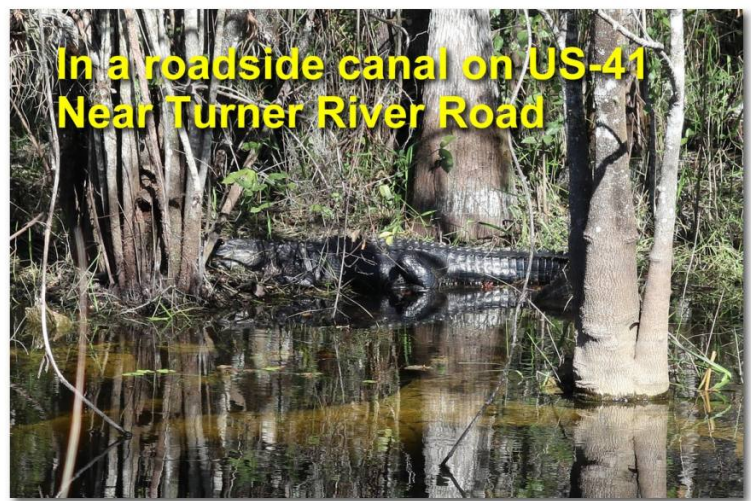




If you do decide to drive up Turner River Road to see wildlife, some tips:

- It's a dirt and gravel road. Dusty.
- River & wildlife on the right driving north.
- 2 or 3 miles is usually all you need.
- Be very careful if you get out of your car.
- Best to take photos from the car window.
- Good photo ops where you see these signs →
- Obey the sign!





Big Cypress Bend

Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve

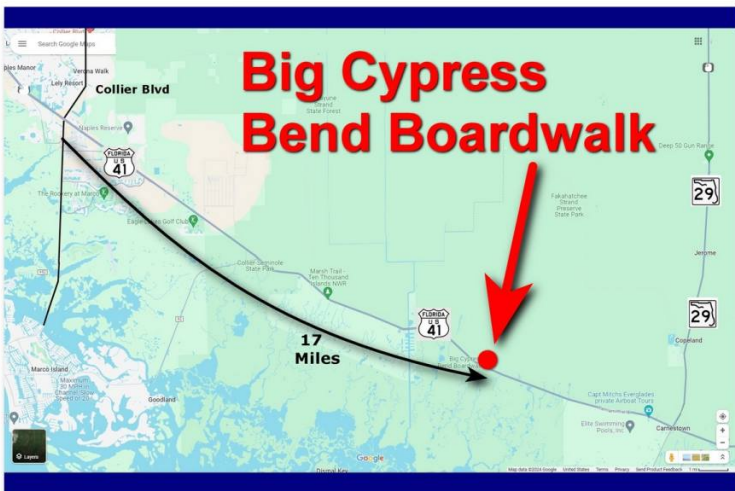
Website: www.floridastateparks.org/parks-and-trails/fakahatchee-strand-preserve-state-park

Where: US-41, Copeland FL 34137.

Get There: US-41 East 17 miles from Collier Blvd intersection.

When: 8am to sunset.

Admission: \$3.



What: Fakahatchee Strand Preserve is the largest State Park in Florida (out of 175 parks).

Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk is one feature of the Preserve.

At the moment, there are TWO Big Cypress Bend Boardwalks: One closed and one partially open.

Eventually the two will be connected to form a loop.

Why are there currently two Big Cypress Bend Boardwalks?

- There is an old 3,200' boardwalk plus 1,000' gravel path thru a swamp to an alligator pond. Lots of wildlife.
- The State had planned a major loop extension of the old boardwalk – and had started work on a small part of the extension plus new parking and visitors' center – when Hurricane Ian hit in Sept 2022.

Ian made the old boardwalk unusable.

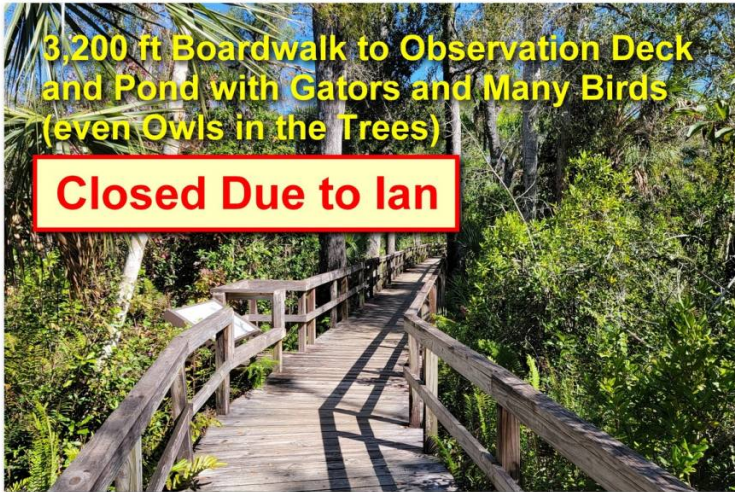
- The State had funding for only part of the new extension.
- Finally, in Feb 2024, about ½ mile of the new extension opened, along with a parking area and visitors' center.
- The State still needs funding for the rest of the new extension and also for repairs to the old boardwalk.

The map on the next slide illustrates all of this.



The next 7 slides show the OLD boardwalk and alligator pond.

- These are not currently accessible due to Hurricane Ian damage.
- After the old boardwalk is repaired, it will become part of the expanded hiking loop (including boardwalk, canopy walk, and trails) shown in the previous map.



The rest of the slides illustrate the parts of Big Cypress Bend that are now open.



Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk
New bridge from parking to visitors' center.



Visitors' Center Overlooks a Wet Prairie



Start of New Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk



Under the Boardwalk at Big Cypress Bend



Boardwalk becomes a crushed shell path when you reach Green Heron Lake



Big Cypress Bend



Six-Mile Cypress Slough Preserve

Six Mile Slough Preserve "Sloo" = Fresh water swamp
Website: www.leegov.com/parks/preserves/sixmilecypress
Friends of Six Mile Slough: www.sloughpreserve.org/
Where: 7751 Penzance Blvd at 6 Mile Cypress Pkwy, Fort Myers, FL. 33966.
Get There: I-75 Exit 131 Daniels Pkwy. West 2.7 mi to 6 Mile Cypress Pkwy. Right onto 6 Mile Cypress Pkwy. Then 1.8 mi to entrance, on right.

Admission: Free. Parking is \$1 per hour max \$5.

Trail hours: Daily dawn to dusk.

Interpretive Center: Tues-Sun 10-4.

Closed Mondays. *(Trail is open Mondays.)*

Guided nature walks:

- Twice daily Jan-Mar.
- Daily Apr, Nov, Dec.
- Approx. once a week in other months.

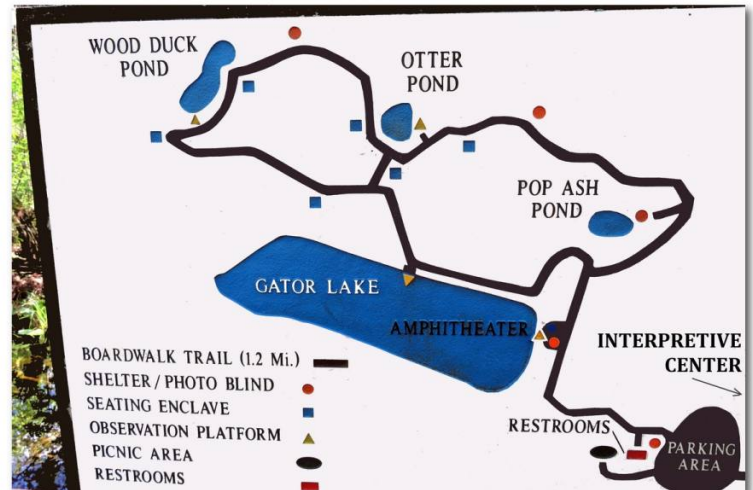
Check website of Friends.

Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve



What's there:

- 3,500 acres of protected wetlands.
- Approx. 11 miles long, 1/3rd mile wide.
- 2-3 feet of water in wet season.
- Still mostly wet in dry season.
- 1.2-mile boardwalk over the water.
- Fully accessible.
- Four viewing platforms onto lakes.
- Many benches and shelters along the boardwalk.



Beginning of 1.2 mile boardwalk over the swamp



Most of the slough is covered in water year round.



Gator Lake - Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve



Alligator sunning on a platform on Gator Lake, Six Mile Cypress Slough



Gator Lake viewing platform – a good place for viewing alligators



American Alligator
One out of 1,250,000 in Florida



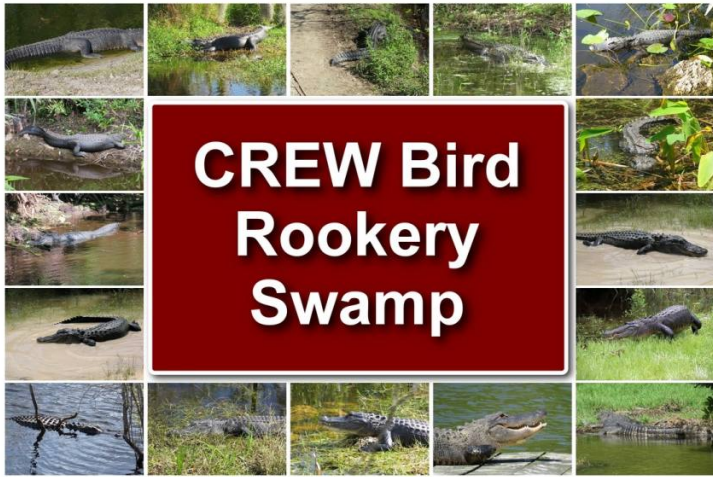
Alligator at Gator Lake



Alligator (and Cooter Turtle) Sunning
Wood Duck Pond
Six-Mile Cypress Slough Preserve



CREW Bird Rookery Swamp



Crew Bird Rookery Swamp Trail
(CREW = Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed)

Website: <https://crewtrust.org/bird-rookery-swamp-trail/>

Where: 1295 Shady Hollow Blvd W, Naples 34120.

Get There: Immokalee Road then left (shortly past County Fair Grounds) on Shady Hollow Blvd. On the right shortly after Shady Hollow becomes gravel.

When: One hour before sunrise to one hour after sunset.

Admission: Free. Don't walk dogs even on leashes.

What: 12 miles of hiking and biking on nature trails, including a 1,500-foot boardwalk with wheelchair access.

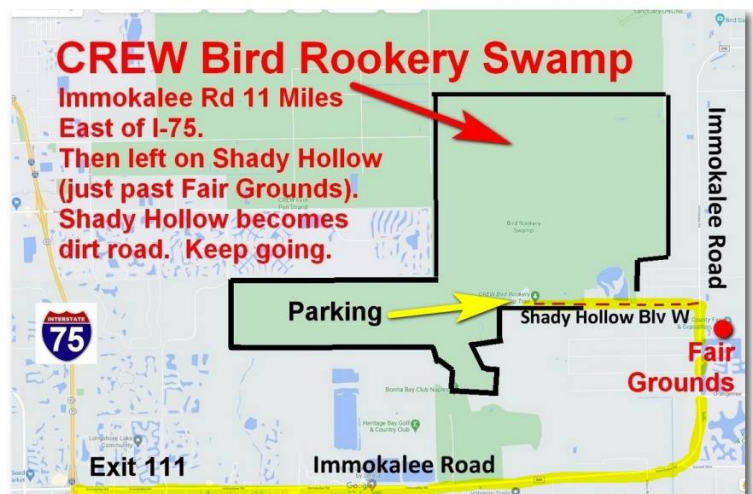
The trails are actually old logging tram roads.

Alligators likely, otters, deer, more. Lots of birds, including songbirds, raptors, barred owls, and kites.

CREW Bird Rookery Swamp

Immokalee Rd 11 Miles East of I-75.

Then left on Shady Hollow (just past Fair Grounds). Shady Hollow becomes dirt road. Keep going.



Before you start walking on the trail, read...



CREW Bird Rookery Swamp Pond Next to Parking



There are usually one or more very large alligators on the far side of the pond.



They don't get much bigger than this!



Florida Red-bellied Turtle
aka Florida Red-bellied Cooter
Shell up to 15"
Weight up to 9 lbs.



CREW
Bird
Rookery
Swamp
Trails

Complete loop
from Parking
and back 12 miles

Boardwalk
Parking

From Parking
to Here 1.2 mi.

Shady Hollow Blvd W

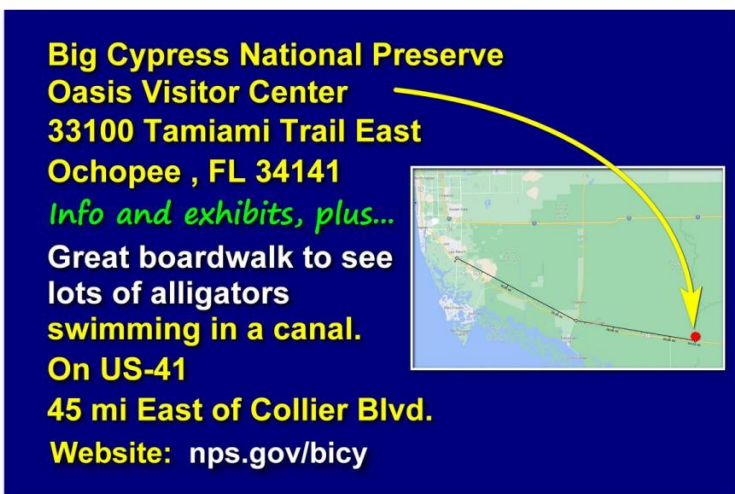
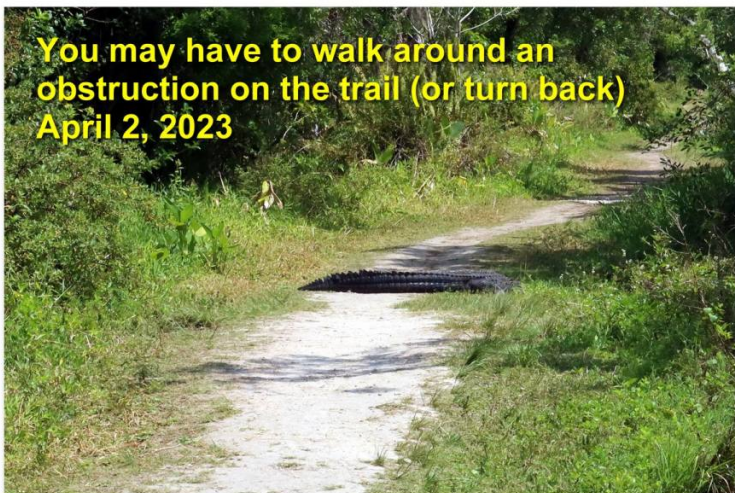
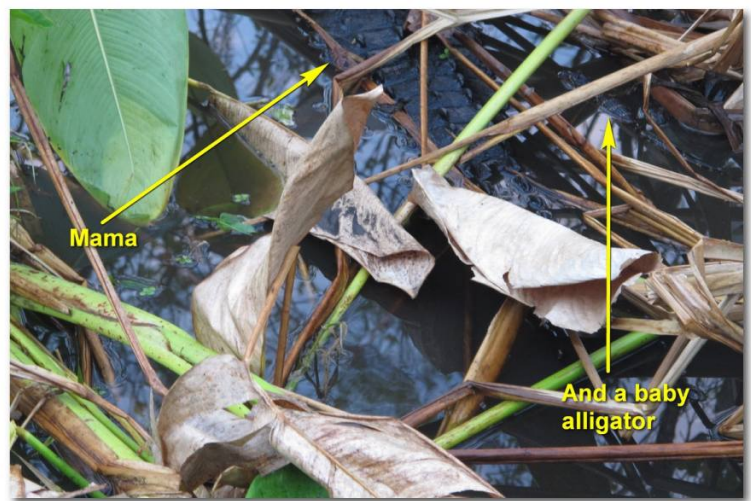
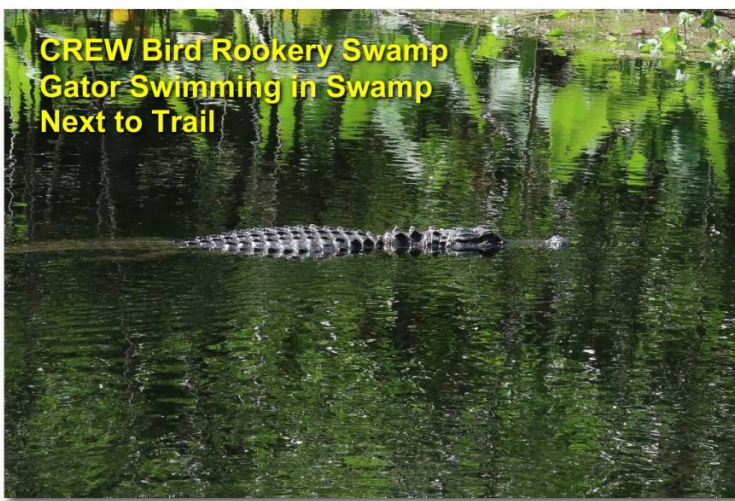
Immokalee Rd

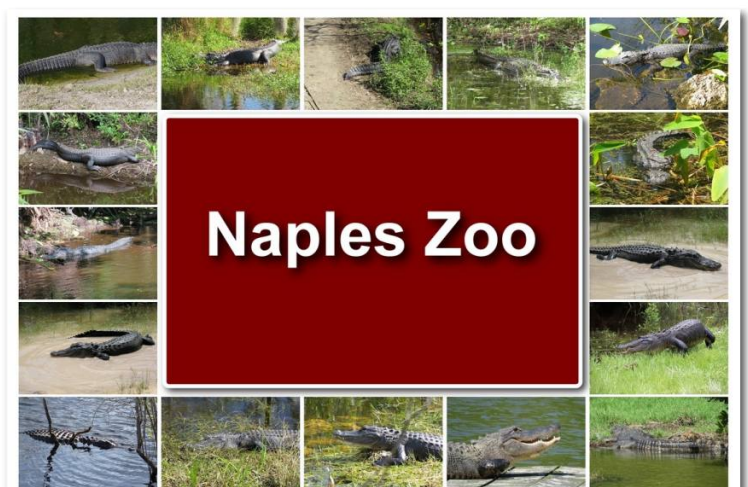
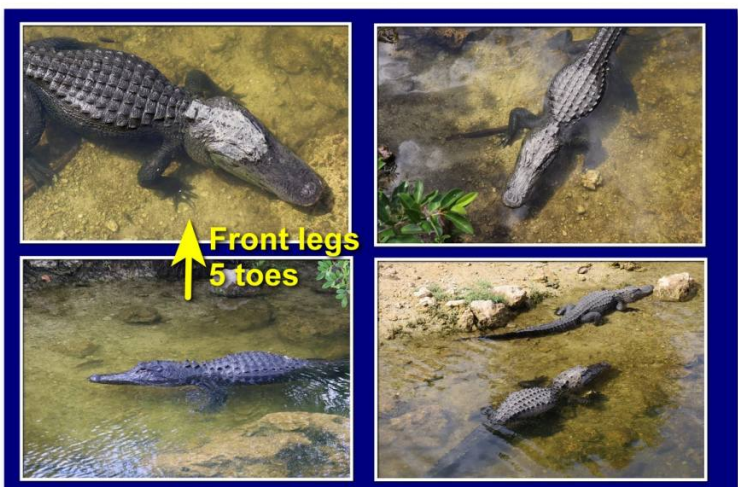
CREW Bird Rookery Swamp Trail Boardwalk



After boardwalk ends, the rest of
the trail is an old logging tram road.







Naples Zoo
Website: www.napleszoo.org/
Where: 1590 Goodlette Rd, Naples 34102.
Get There: Just south of Golden Gate Pkwy on Goodlette Road.
Admission: Adults \$23. Children 3-12 \$15. Free parking. 9 am to 4:30 pm daily.
Formal name: The Naples Zoo at Caribbean Gardens.
What: 43-acre zoo and historic botanical garden. 70 species. 375,000 visitors/year.



Naples Zoo - Alligator Bay



**Alligator Bay
Naples Zoo**



Freedom Park

Website: <https://www.collierparks.com/>

Where: 1515 Golden Gate Pkwy, Naples.
Just east of the intersection of Golden Gate Parkway and Goodlette-Frank Road.

When: Daily 7am to sunset.
Education Center 9am to 10pm Mon-Sat.

Admission: Free.

What: 50 acre wetlands.

- 3,500-foot boardwalk over the eastern side of the park.
- Plus trails and six lookout pavilions around the lakes in the western side of the park.
- 2,500 square foot Education Center.
- Freedom Memorial – tribute to the lives lost on 9/11/01 in the terrorist attacks and to the heroes of past and present wars.

Freedom Park is an urban park across from Coastland Mall.

Surprisingly, alligators and lots of other wildlife are there:

Birds: Anhingas, egrets, herons, gallinules, limpkins, etc.

Reptiles: Alligators, turtles, iguanas, snakes, etc.

Others: Marsh rabbits, raccoons, etc.

**Freedom Park
Across the road from
Coastland Mall
Naples**



**Freedom Park - Naples
Golden Gate Pkwy at Goodlette-Frank**





Freedom Park



Freedom Park



Florida Soft-shell Turtle - Freedom Park

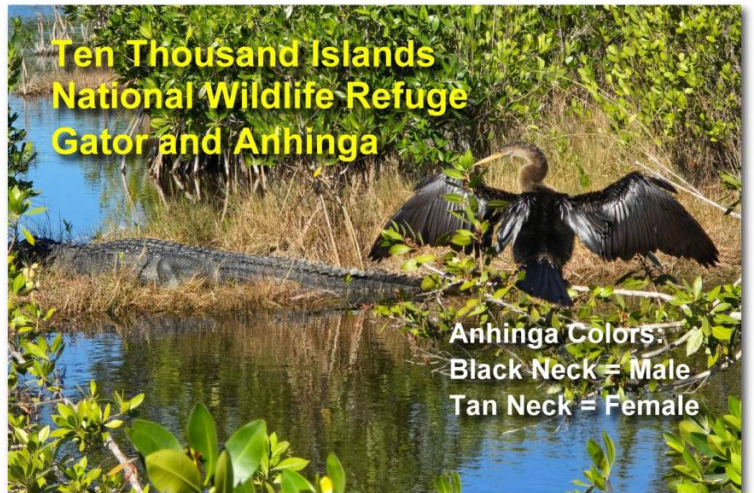


Let's Finish with a Few Photos of Alligators in Several Other Places Around Naples



Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge – US41, 11 Mi East of Naples

Turtle? Tilapia? In Mouth



Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge Gator and Anhinga

**Anhinga Colors:
Black Neck = Male
Tan Neck = Female**



**Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge
US-41 11 Miles East of Collier Blvd., Naples**



**Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge
Sanibel Island**

**Eagle Lakes Park
US-41 Just West of Collier Blvd
East Naples**



**Roadside Canal Along Tamiami Trail
East of Naples**



**Roadside Canal Along Tamiami Trail
East of Naples**



Fakahatchee Strand State Park

**Along Janes Memorial
Scenic Drive.
From Car Window.**



**Corey Billie's Airboat Rides
US-41 Tamiami Trail - Ochopee**



**Juvenile Gator at Kirby Storter Park
Big Cypress National Preserve
On US-41 (Tamiami Trail)
37 Miles East of Collier Blvd.**



Calusa Nature Center, Fort Myers



**Shark Valley
Everglades Nat'l Park, Tamiami Trail**

On US-41 near Collier-Dade County Line.



