An alligator needs good teeth; nature is its dentist

MINA WALThER / Tide Lines

A 12-foot alligator, discovered warming itself in the afternoon sun among the plentiful pickerel-weeds, arrowroots and saw grasses growing in the water, is a baleful presence at the edge of a winding river. A moment earlier, the day had been lighthearted with puffs of breeze, interesting still-legged birds and the melodic lapping of unhurried current. Now, several people just rounding a bend suddenly become tense, their feet hesitate in midstep, an ancient caution awakens, the very air loses its carefree sparkle. A big alligator is a chilling sight. People just rounding a bend suddenly become tense, their feet hesitate in midstep, an ancient caution awakens, the very air loses its carefree sparkle. A big alligator is a chilling sight.

Imagine meeting one of those on a walk.

Today, there are 22 living kinds on Earth that scientists group inclusively as the Order Crocodylia of the Class Reptilia. Of the 22, 14 are classified as members of the family commonly called crocodiles. Only two of the 22 are named alligators, our Alligator mississippiensis and the rarer, smaller A. sinensis that lives in China. Only two of the 22 are named alligators, our Alligator mississippiensis and the rarer, smaller A. sinensis that lives in China.

What system could possibly improve on that?

An initial question is often, “What’s the difference between an alligator and a crocodile?” The first inhabits fresh water, has a rather broad snout, shows no teeth when its mouth is closed, is dark in color and lives only in the southeastern part of the United States or in China. By the way, the name “alligator” arose when Spanish explorers exclaimed “el legarto,” their word for lizard, when they first saw ours.

Alligator blood is the same temperature as the weather outside, so they stay where it’s warm all year, with an ideal between 89 and 95 degrees F. They know springtime; then females at least 8 years old mate and construct nests mounded to about 3 feet high, laying 30 to 50 eggs in a top cavity. That story merits telling on Mother’s Day.

Alligators are descendants of reptiles that survived whatever the global catastrophe was that killed off the dinosaurs and other life toward the middle of the Age of Reptiles, some 65 million years ago. Most of its former relatives are now extinct. One, the giant crocodile Deinosuchus, measured 36 feet, had a jawbone 6 feet long, weighed 6 tons and lived not far away in coastal Texas. Imagine meeting one of those on a walk.

A flap guards each of the two nostrils to keep water out of the lungs when it’s totally under, and a transparent nictitating membrane then covers its eyes so it can open its regular eyelids and see what goes on among the fishes. If quiet, the alligator can stay underwater for hours as its four-chambered heart, most advanced of suchus, runs at the 22 are named alligators, our Alligator mississippiensis and the rarer, smaller A. sinensis that lives in China.

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Crunching bones or turtle shells isn’t easy and the state of its conical, pointed, spaced-out, deep-socketed teeth is highly important to any member of the Order Crocodylia. All have the benefit of nature as dentist, and no dentist could be better. When wear and tear impair a tooth, the tooth simply falls out and a replacement grows to the next below in the empty socket. What system could possibly improve on that?