

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

# Can You Tell a 'Gator From a Croc?

by Guy Belleranti

Look closely at the reptiles pictured below. Can you tell which one is the crocodile and which is the alligator?



Many people confuse crocodiles and alligators, and it's no wonder - the two animals are closely related. However, if you know a few facts about each animal, I think you'll be able to tell



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- Both have a special additional eyelid called a nictitating membrane. This clear eyelid keeps their eyes moist and clean. Since it is clear, crocs and gators can see through this eyelid even when it's closed.
- Both have excellent hearing and senses of smell. Their ears and nostrils have flaps that close when they dive underwater.
- How long can alligators and crocodiles stay underwater? While they usually stay under for a half hour or less, they can hold their breath much longer. Alligators and crocodiles can spend two hours or more underwater while resting.
- Both animals have huge, powerful tails that help them swim and fight predators. But the tails serve another function as well. Their tails store fat that can be used for nourishment when food is scarce.

- Mother alligators and crocodiles guard their eggs and take good care of their hatchlings. Most other reptiles, including turtles and snakes, lay their eggs and move on. They do not watch after or care for their young like alligators and crocodiles do.

While these facts may be interesting, they're not helping you determine which picture is the alligator and which one is the crocodile. To help you tell them apart, let's discuss how these two animals are different.

- While both are crocodylians, they are in different groups or families. In fact, there are three families of crocodylians. There's an alligator family, which includes alligators and caiman. There's also a crocodile family. And there's a third group called gharials, which are an endangered group of crocodylians from India.
- Alligators and caiman have u-shaped, rounded snouts. Crocodile snouts are more pointed and v-shaped. Gharial snouts are very long and slender. In fact, the gharial's snout is so slender that it can only catch and eat fish. Alligators and crocodiles eat all sorts of animals.



- An alligator's wider upper jaw overlaps its lower jaw when it closes its mouth. Because of this its teeth don't show. A crocodile's upper and lower jaw, however, are about the same width. So when a crocodile closes its mouth some of its teeth still show.
- While many crocodiles live in freshwater, some also live in saltier sea water. The largest crocodylian of all, the Estuarine Crocodile of Australia and Asia, is an example of a species that can be found in both fresh and saltwater. Alligators are found only in freshwater habitats.

Look back at the two pictures on the first page. Now that you know your crocodylians, you should be able to tell which picture is the croc and which one's the 'gator. To the left, you see an American Alligator. (You can tell by the shape of its snout.) To the right, a Saltwater Crocodile.

## About the Author

Guy Belleranti works as a docent at Reid Park Zoo in Tucson, Arizona. The information in this article comes from his experiences working with animals and teaching others.

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1. Correctly label each picture as an alligator, a crocodile, or a gharial.



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4. Explain what a nictitating membrane is and what it does?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

5. Tell whether each fact about gharials is true or false.

\_\_\_\_\_ Gharials live in South America.

\_\_\_\_\_ Gharials are an endangered species.

\_\_\_\_\_ Gharials are a type of alligator.

\_\_\_\_\_ Gharials only eat fish.

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# Can You Tell a 'Gator From a Croc?

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Match each vocabulary word from the article to its definition.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1. confuse

a. thin, skinny

\_\_\_\_\_ 2. prey

b. long nose and jaws of an animal's head

\_\_\_\_\_ 3. nourishment

c. measure of how wide something is



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\_\_\_\_\_ 7. snout

g. at risk of extinction

\_\_\_\_\_ 8. width

h. animals that have recently hatched from eggs

\_\_\_\_\_ 9. endangered

i. layer of skin or tissue that protects body parts

\_\_\_\_\_ 10. membrane

j. type of animal similar to an alligator

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In the article, "Can You Tell a Gator From a Croc?", you learned about the similarities and differences between crocodiles and alligators.

In your own words, write a paragraph describing how to tell the two animals apart using only your eyes.

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## ANSWER KEY

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1. Correctly label each picture as an alligator, a crocodile, or a gharial.



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## ANSWER KEY

# Can You Tell a 'Gator From a Croc?

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Match each vocabulary word from the article to its definition.

**d** 1. confuse

**a.** thin, skinny

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**i** 10. membrane

**j.** type of animal similar to an alligator