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National Geographic Readers: Alligators and Crocodiles

By: Laura Marsh

Is it a crocodile or an alligator? Find out what makes these two reptiles different.

6-8

Age Range

15-30 mins

Length

570L

Lexile[®] Measure

3.7

AR Level

Alligators and Crocodiles

Laura Marsh

 NATIONAL
GEOGRAPHIC

Washington, D.C.



Guess What's Different

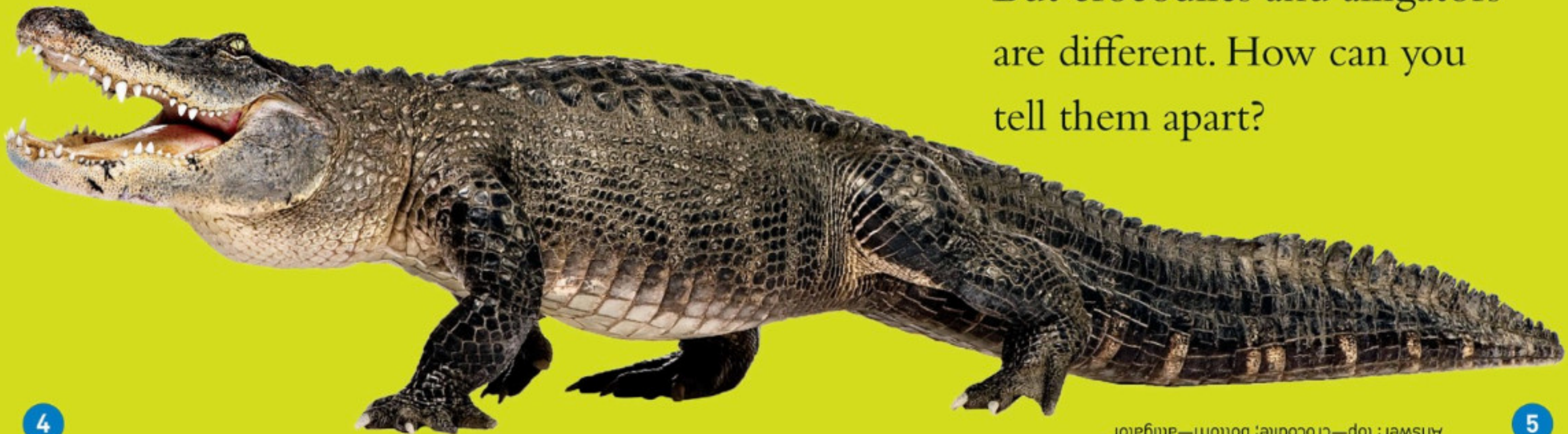
Snap! What big teeth you have!

Crocodiles and alligators look alike. They both have huge jaws with pointed teeth. They both have a long tail. Bumpy plates cover their bodies.

Can you tell which is the alligator and which is the crocodile?



But crocodiles and alligators are different. How can you tell them apart?



Alligators have a wide snout. It is rounded and U-shaped. Alligators are usually a dark color.

Croc Talk 
SNOUT: an animal's nose and mouth that stick out from its face

Crocodiles have a thinner snout. It is pointed and V-shaped. Crocodiles are lighter in color than alligators.



A Pile of Reptiles

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Though alligators and crocodiles are different, they are both reptiles. A reptile's body has scales or bony plates.

Snakes and lizards are reptiles with scales. Alligators and crocodiles are reptiles with bony plates called scutes (scoots). Both scales and scutes help protect reptiles' bodies.



emerald tree boa



chameleon



a close-up view of scutes on a Cuban crocodile

Croc Talk



REPTILE: An animal that is cold-blooded and has scaly skin. Many reptiles lay eggs on land.

Around the World

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Alligators and crocodiles belong to a group of reptiles called crocodilians (krok-uh-DILL-ee-uns). There are 25 different kinds of crocodilians. They usually live in warm areas around the world.

Crocodilians are never far from the water. They spend a lot of time in ponds, lakes, marshes, wetlands, rivers, and swamps.



a gharial beside a lake



a broad-snouted caiman in a swamp



a slender-snouted crocodile in a river

Perfect for the Water

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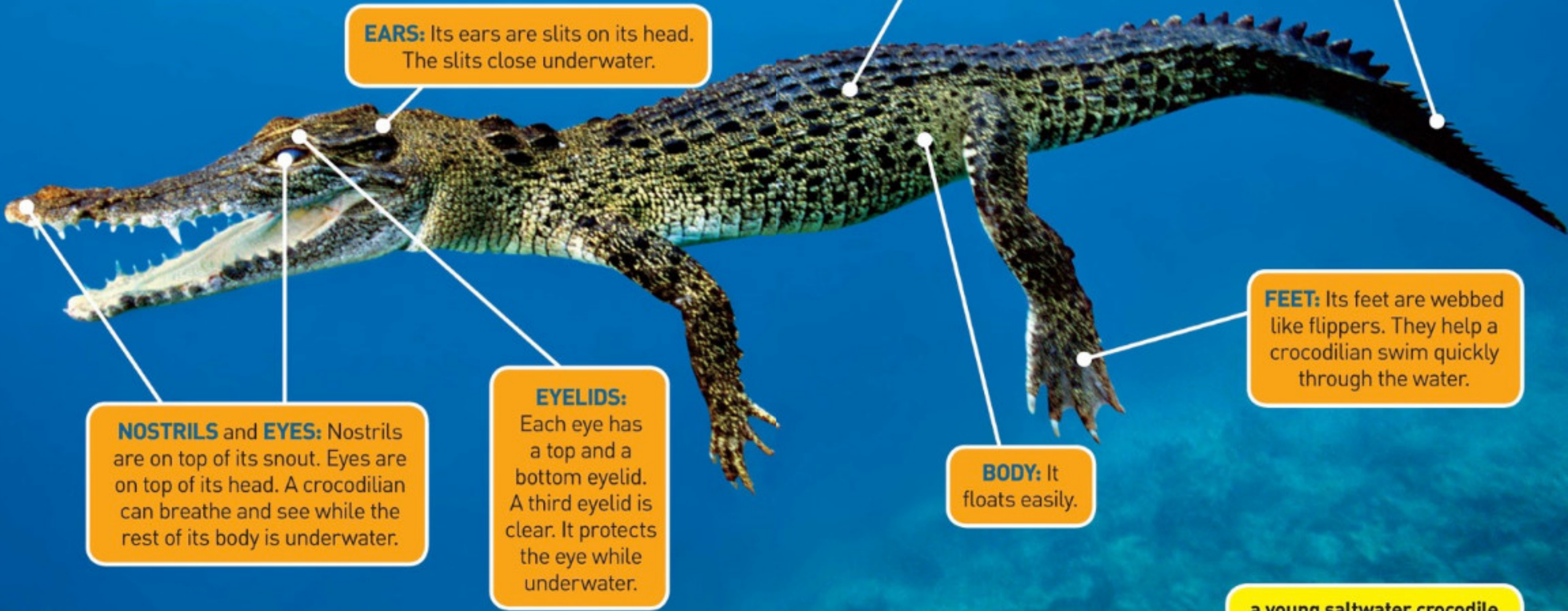
Q

What does a crocodile cook in?

A croc pot!

A

Alligators and crocodiles are built for living in the water. Both alligators and crocodiles have these parts.



EARS: Its ears are slits on its head. The slits close underwater.

NOSTRILS and EYES: Nostrils are on top of its snout. Eyes are on top of its head. A crocodilian can breathe and see while the rest of its body is underwater.

EYELIDS: Each eye has a top and a bottom eyelid. A third eyelid is clear. It protects the eye while underwater.

LUNGS: A crocodilian can hold its breath for up to two hours when its head is underwater.

TAIL: A strong tail pushes its big body through the water.

FEET: Its feet are webbed like flippers. They help a crocodilian swim quickly through the water.


BODY: It floats easily.

a young saltwater crocodile



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American crocodiles

Croc Talk 

SENSES: sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch

PREY: an animal that is eaten by another animal

Crocodylians have excellent senses. They can see, smell, and hear better than many other reptiles. They see much better in the dark than we do.

Crocodylians have special skin, too. They can feel something moving nearby. In muddy water, they can easily find their prey.

Grabbing Dinner

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Crocodylians are carnivores (CAR-nuh-vors), which means they eat meat. However, they are not picky eaters.

All kinds of fish, insects, birds, frogs, snakes, and mammals make a tasty meal. Even big animals such as antelope and buffalo are on the menu.



spectacled caiman

A Nile crocodile tries to grab a wildebeest from the herd.

Around the World

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Q

What's worse than an alligator coming to dinner?

Two alligators coming to dinner!

A



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7 FUN FACTS About Crocodilians

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Crocodilians grow a lot. Newly hatched young are less than a foot long. But adults are 10 to 20 feet long!



Alligator teeth are hollow.



Some crocodilians lay up to 90 eggs at one time. That's a lot of babies!

There is only one place on Earth you can find both alligators and crocodiles in the wild—southern Florida, U.S.A.



Mothers come running (or swimming!) when they hear their young call for help.



Crocodilians lose their teeth and get new ones all through their lives.



Like lions, crocodilians can roar.

King of the Crocs



A saltwater crocodile feeds in a sanctuary in Australia.

We can can

The largest crocodilian is the saltwater crocodile. It can grow to more than 20 feet long and weigh over 2,200 pounds. It is an excellent swimmer and can travel far out to sea.

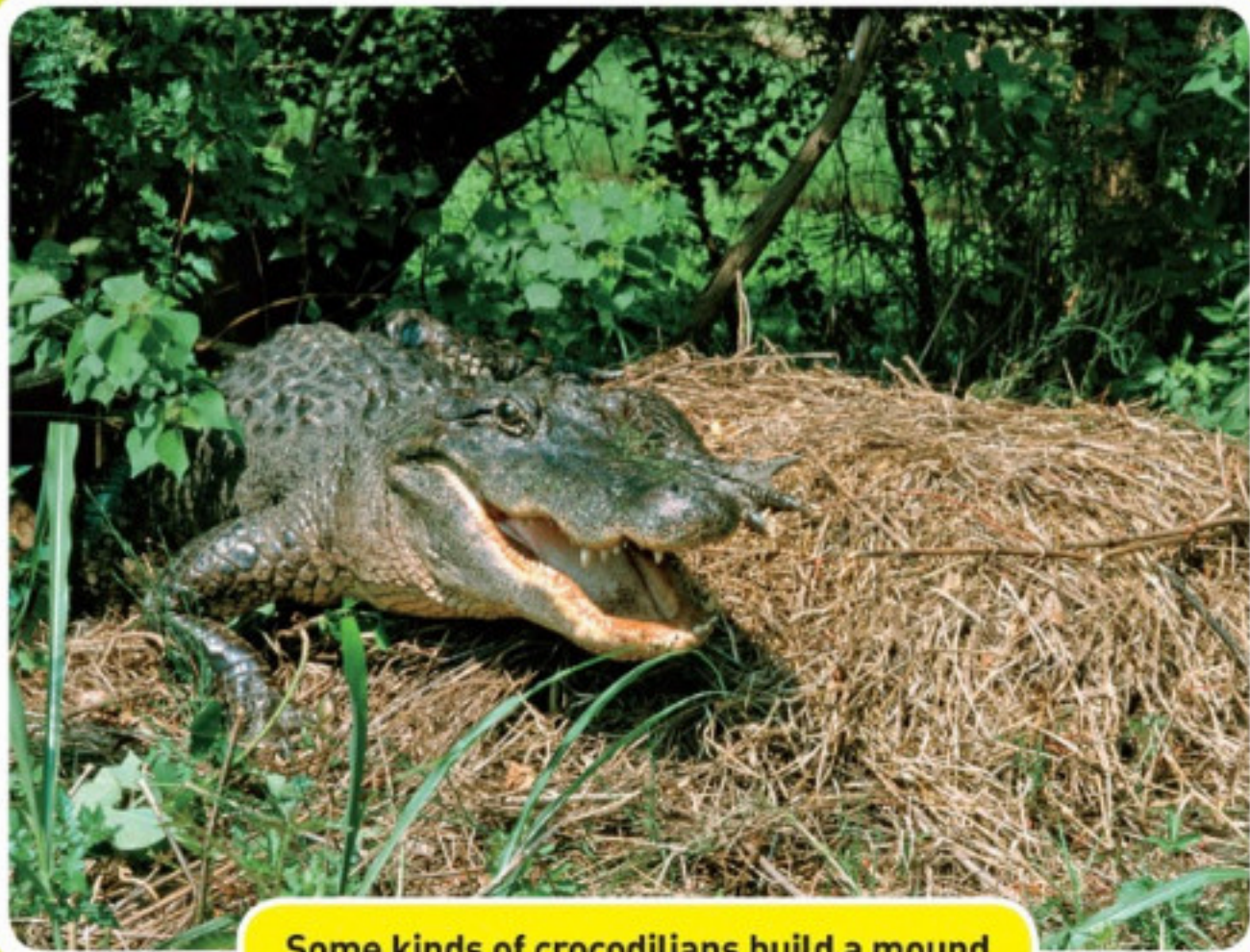
Saltwater crocodiles may be the most dangerous crocodilians of all. They are most likely to attack—and they are deadly!



Nest and Nursery

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Most reptiles lay their eggs and leave. But crocodilians stick around. They stay close to the nest and protect their young.



Some kinds of crocodilians build a mound of plants, mud, and leaves for a nest.



Other kinds of crocodilians dig a hole for a nest.



Crocodilian babies hatch from their eggs.

A mother crocodilian waits for a few months. When she hears squeaks from the eggs, she uncovers the nest. The eggs begin to hatch.

We can

The mother gently carries the hatchlings in her mouth. She takes them to the water for their first swim. And they're off!

Croc Talk

HATCHLING: an animal that has just come out of its shell



American alligator

Endangered

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New crocodilians hatch every year. But sometimes more animals die than hatch. Crocodilians can become endangered.

American alligators were once endangered. Then laws were made to protect them. Their numbers grew. Now there are over one million American alligators alive today.

Other crocodilians are now endangered. What can you do to help save these cool crocs and alligators?

The Morelet's crocodile, or Mexican crocodile, was once endangered. Now it is listed as of "least concern."



The most endangered species is the Philippine (FILL-ih-peen) crocodile. There are only about 250 left in the wild.

Croc Talk



ENDANGERED: at risk of dying out completely

QUIZ WHIZ

How much do you know about crocodilians? After reading this book, probably a lot! Take this quiz and find out.

Answers are at the bottom of page 31.

How many different types of crocodilians are there?

- A. 4
- B. 12
- C. 17
- D. 25

1



2



Alligators have a _____-shaped snout.

- A. square
- B. U
- C. V
- D. heart

Which of these is the largest?

- A. the saltwater crocodile
- B. the Nile crocodile
- C. the American alligator
- D. the Philippine crocodile

3



4



Baby crocodilians hatch in a _____.

- A. tree
- B. pond
- C. nest
- D. river

5



Crocodilians lose their _____ and get new ones throughout their lives.

- A. teeth
- B. eyes
- C. ears
- D. tails

6



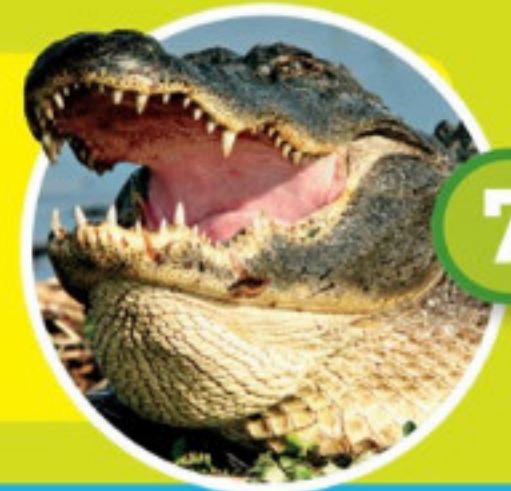
When does a mother crocodile uncover the eggs in the nest?

- A. when the moon is full
- B. when she hears squeaks
- C. when she's hungry
- D. when it's been exactly 30 days

Crocodiles and alligators eat _____.

- A. birds
- B. fish
- C. some big animals
- D. all of the above

7





ENDANGERED: at risk of dying out completely



HATCHLING: an animal that has just come out of its shell



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