



# American Alligator: Ancient Predator in the Modern World

*Kelby Ouchley*

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“From prehistoric relatives to post-endangered status, Ouchley provides a comprehensive review of the alligator, an iconic southern creature.”—Michael K. Steinberg, author of *Stalking the Ghost Bird*

“The conservation of the American alligator is one of history’s best examples of the sustainable-use model for wildlife conservation. The effort to preserve the alligator has contributed to the conservation of wetlands and many other wetland-dependent species throughout its range. Ouchley does an outstanding job of explaining the mysteries of this keystone species.”—Robert Barham, Secretary of Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries

“Kelby Ouchley is part of a generation of wildlife professionals that helped bring the American alligator back from the brink of extinction. He provides fascinating insights into its fight for survival.”—Jim Kurth, Chief of National Wildlife Refuge System, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Having survived since the Mesozoic era, alligators teetered on the brink of extinction in the 1960s. Their recovery in the 1970s and 1980s was largely due to legislative intervention, and today populations are closely monitored throughout their range. *American Alligator* is the most up-to-date and comprehensive treatment of this resilient relic, a creature with a brain weighing less than half an ounce that has successfully adapted to a changing Earth for more than 200 million years.

Kelby Ouchley chronicles the evolution of *Alligator mississippiensis* from “shieldcroc”—the last common ancestor of modern-day alligators, crocodiles, caimans, and the gharial—to its current role as keystone of the ecological health of America’s southern swamps and marshes. In Florida, the apex predator uses its snout and feet to clear muck from holes in the limestone bedrock. During the dry season, these small ponds or “alligator holes” provide refuge, food, and water for a variety of wildlife. In Louisiana, millions of dollars are spent on the bounty of the non-native nutria that overgraze marsh vegetation, but alligators prey on these coastal rodents free of charge.

Today only twenty-three species of crocodylians remain. That the alligator lineage survives at all, having successfully weathered millions of years of environmental change, speaks to an impressive degree of fitness and adaptability.

The loss of the American alligator would be a blow to biodiversity and an ecosystem disruption affecting all levels of the food chain. While the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service removed it from the endangered species list in 1987 and today regulates the legal trade of the animal and its products, Ouchley cautions us not to forget the lessons learned: human activities, from urban development to energy production, can still threaten the future of the gator and its southern wetland habitat.

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