

the TROPICAL GARDEN



It's Mango Season!



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THE STORY OF THE GARDEN **CROCODILE**

How a rare American Crocodile may
have made its way into the Garden

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Though occasionally basking on shore, crocs prefer being in water and are more active at night.



One great benefit of botanic gardens is the wildlife they foster, whether intentionally or not. Fairchild is visited by lots of unusual creatures, and for the last few years has been home to an American Crocodile (*Crocodylus acutus*)—a rare native with ancestry rooted in deep time.

A glance at a map shows Fairchild is bounded by residences to the west and south, but for the most part to the north and east stretches Matheson Hammock Park—a picnic and outdoor recreation area that leads directly to Biscayne Bay and the Atlantic as you travel east. Matheson Hammock Park supports large coastal mangrove areas, and in turn, the creatures dependent upon mangroves. Crocodiles prefer estuaries and coastlines, and are sometimes among those mangrove dwellers.

At their northernmost range in South Florida, crocodiles are a tropical animal, more common in the Caribbean and Central America. Indeed they were nearing extinction in the United States, with only about 400 to 500 individuals left, when they were federally listed as endangered in 1975.

So how did the crocodile get here? The expanse from the coast to the Garden's

easternmost area consists of less than 3,000 feet of wetlands in a straight line—easily traversed by an animal equipped for life both on land and in water. Or, the crocodile could have entered through the marina at Matheson Hammock, south into the canoe launch canal, and then traveled a straight shot of only about 1,500 feet of marshy areas crisscrossed with canals to reach the Garden.

University of Florida Wildlife Biologist Joe Wasilewski says the crocodile at Fairchild looks to be a male, and that, “when they reach about 6 feet, they develop territorial issues and males are driven away by more dominant males.” So it’s possible the croc was seeking territory of its own when it came upon the Garden’s brackish lakes.

Though not known to seek open ocean, different crocodile species are found in many parts of the world, with the American crocodile present in 17 countries. It’s been reported repopulating the Cayman Islands, which would require covering nearly 200 miles of ocean from the nearest part of Cuba, so the sea is no impediment.

Wasilewski says it’s not surprising that there is a crocodile in Fairchild’s neighborhood, as they’ve been found here before; “the American



crocodile population is at historic levels of about 2,000, with far less area to inhabit than when they were declared endangered in 1975," he notes. However, it's not incredibly likely Fairchild will be host to a thriving crocodile population, at least not any males. "They are territorial and once established will keep other males away," Wasilewski reiterated. He has even tracked cannibalism in young crocodiles—possibly a natural, if not pleasant, method of population control.


Federal protection and the efforts of dedicated wildlife professionals have combined to increase the population of this incredible animal. Interestingly, Wasilewski points out that some human-made structures have helped the crocodile recover. The Turkey Point Nuclear Generating Station's cooling canals are well-known crocodile nesting sites. Contrary to what many believe, Wasilewski says it's not the temperature of the canals that attracts crocodiles, but the construction that formed berms and small ponds ideal for the drier conditions and lower salinity required for crocodile nesting and hatchlings.

Is it a gator or croc? That's a common question. Alligators are far more numerous than crocodiles in the United States, and their range extends up to North Carolina and west along the Gulf Coast of Texas, so if you encounter one of these two huge reptiles, it's more likely to be an alligator. Alligators have much broader and rounded snouts, while that of the croc is narrower with a pointier tip. Think of a "U" shape versus a "V" shape. To my eyes, the tip of the gator snout often looks much more bulbous than a croc's.

Otherwise, there are the teeth. Crocodile teeth are slightly pointier and less rounded than those of an alligator. And with mouths shut, crocodile teeth are far more visible, especially the lower teeth. Generally, alligators look very dark, nearly black, while crocodiles are lighter gray to tan.

But the million-dollar question of course is "Is it dangerous?" While the American crocodile is considered less aggressive than the Nile or Australian saltwater crocs, it's foolish not to keep your distance; just look at those teeth—it is a supreme predator evolved for both defense and offence. What we feel is the desire to learn more about or get closer photos of an amazing creature may be viewed by the crocodile as a threat; remember, while they do not actively hunt humans, they are quite territorial and can be defensive. Those big teeth aren't for nothing.

Naturally, if someone invaded your home and personal space, would you not fight back? That's what would happen if you forced a croc confrontation, and it would not end well for you or the animal. Crocodiles are more than happy being left alone.

This uncommon animal is federally protected, so besides being an incredibly reckless thing to do, harassing a crocodile in any way—including feeding one—is illegal. If, while wandering our wondrous Garden, you come across this ancient saurian, keep your distance, go the other way, but don't panic; it won't approach you. Just enjoy knowing it shares a love of Fairchild. 

A Note on Garden Wildlife

Crocodiles may look placid most of the time, but never approach one. While they are not known to consider humans as potential prey, we are easily viewed as a threat. It is a wild animal with massive jaws and teeth, not in a cage or on display. Take it seriously, use common sense—leave the wildlife alone—and you have nothing to fear from wildlife while exploring Fairchild.

This also goes for our many snakes, lizards, turtles, possums, raccoons, etc. Please don't attempt to touch or feed them, for their own good and yours.



The American crocodile, right, compared to an alligator, left. Note the croc's narrower snout and tan color versus the gator's rounder snout and darker color.