

# Do Alligators Attack Paddle Boards? (Surprising Numbers)

Written by [Tom Walters](#) in [SUP Fun](#)



Just picture it. You are paddling down a canal in Florida on your new SUP, admiring the view, and you feel.....a bump Then another bump, this one harder than the first.

Then before you know what is happening. You are pulled from your board into the water. Powerful jaws pull you away from your board. Blood, your blood fills the water as you are shaken viciously and dragged beneath the surface.

Then, thankfully, you wake up

What a nightmare. It really makes wonder if you want to go for that paddle that you were planning for the day. Is an alligator going to attack and kill you? Well, let's look at the numbers first.

**It is highly unlikely that a stand up paddle boarder will be attacked by an alligator, although it is not impossible. There are certain precautions you should take when paddling in waters where alligators are or may be present.**

Around 55 million people die in the world each year. ([source](#)) The question we have here is how many of those 55 million people are attacked and killed by alligators in any given year. Well according to [Wikipedia](#), the annual death toll from alligators is about 1 per year on average.

Just for some perspective, a deer is 200 times more likely to kill you than an alligator according to [Roaring Earth](#).

So, while alligators are big, mean-looking beasts, they do not pose a statistical threat to people on a stand up paddle board. According to Dr. [Jarrod A. Forrester, MD](#),

***" ... So, while it is important that people recreating in the wilderness know what to do when they encounter a potentially dangerous animal, the actual risk of death is quite low."***

But there is that 1 death on average per year, and you certainly don't want that to be you, so how do you protect yourself?

Well first it is best to familiarize yourself with the threat.

## Where do Alligators Live?



There are only 2 species of alligators in the world; the Chinese Alligator and the American Alligator. The Chinese Alligator is much smaller than its American cousin. It tops out at about 5 feet long. It is critically endangered and is protected in a very small area of eastern China. Because of their size and limited range, the Chinese Alligator poses very little threat to human life.

The American Alligator lives in fresh water, marshes and swamps in the South East United States. Their habitat stretches from North Carolina to Texas. So, if you are paddling somewhere other than Southeast United States and far eastern China (a very small part), then you don't anything to worry about concerning alligators.

I live in Coastal North Carolina, and always keep an eye out for gators, especially when paddling in fresh water. I just assume they are there. While highly uncommon, I have seen an alligator in saltwater. He was actually in the ocean, in the surf zone. I followed him until it became clear that he was heading toward the inlet. I assume to get back to fresh water.

## What do Alligators Eat?



Alright, so what are alligators eating if not humans on SUPs? Well, alligators eat what is convenient. That can be fish, turtles, rodents, larger mammals that they hunt. Alligators will also feed on animals that are already dead.

When it comes to humans, they will generally choose to flee, but the attacks that do occur on humans are from alligators being opportunistic. Meaning, people are attacked when they get too close to the water's edge and do not see the gator waiting, or the humans are swimming in the area with large alligators.

## How do Alligators Hunt?

Alligators are ambush hunters. They are capable of quick bursts of speed, but cannot have prolonged pursuits. Alligators will stalk their prey by staying just below the water surface, near the edge of the water.

When an unsuspecting animal comes to the edge of the water, they make their move. They leap forward snap their powerful jaws shut on their prey and either swallow it, or drag it into the water to drown it and feast on it later.



This is why standing near the edge of the water is one of the worst things to do in alligator country. Be it a squirrel, deer, dog or human, It all looks like dinner to an alligator.

Alligators are very shy by nature. If they are not actively hunting, they want to stay out of sight. A sunning gator will generally make a dash for the water when he spies a paddle boarder. He is almost certainly not attacking, he is just rushing for the cover and safety of the water.

## **What are Signs that Alligators are Nearby?**

Gators are cold blooded and need to warm themselves in the sun daily. If an alligator has set up shop in a particular location there will most likely be some telltale signs.

Alligators will generally use the same path to haul themselves out of the water. You might notice a beaten down trail in the vegetation or a smooth “slide” in the mud on the bank of the water. When you notice these signs it is best to find another place to paddle.

These slides may also be created by female alligators building her nest, laying her eggs and tending her nest. Make sure you do not come between the mother and her nest, or the mother and the way back to the water from her nest.

During mating season, which is generally April through late May or early June, male alligators will make a low bellowing sound and slap the water with their jaws. If you hear this, stay away. These males will also be more territorial than usual and be slower to retreat.

If you are paddling in fresh water from coastal NC to coastal TX, including all of Florida, even if you don't see the signs that an alligator is around. You should act as if one is, which brings us to the last topic...

## **How to Avoid an Alligator Attack on a Stand up Paddle Board.**

### **Don't SUP where there are Alligators**

If you truly want to avoid an alligator encounter your best bet is to not paddle in the Southeast United States, or a small area in Eastern China, since these are the only places where alligators are native.

If you do paddle in these areas, then stick to salt water. There is a much less chance of seeing, let alone being attacked by an alligator in salt water. Look out for those pesky sharks though.

Alligators do not like cold weather or cold water. They become much less active in these times. If you want to take extra precautions, stay off the water until temperatures dip below 70, the farther below, the better.

### **Fishing With Alligators Nearby**

Don't do it. I have heard stories of alligators taking hooked fish and becoming hooked themselves. I would not want to have a thrashing alligator attached to my SUP. If I go SUP fishing and I see

an alligator nearby, I move, even if it is one of my favorite spots. I see no need to let an alligator associate food with my paddle board.

The same goes for feeding alligators. There are signs all over the place warning people not to feed the alligators. Heed those signs.

### **Avoid the Shoreline**

If you do SUP in areas known to have alligators, then it is best to avoid the shoreline while paddling. I was paddling up the North-East Cape Fear River last year and rounded a bend very close to the shore. There on the bank I saw at least an 8 footer basking on the muddy bank.

When he saw me he charged straight at me, I thought he was attacking, but he hit the water with a huge splash and went right under my bow. Scared me, but also reassured me that these guys are not interested in attacking me on my SUP. This is not a place I would go swimming though.

Because of this encounter, I now usually avoid narrow channels and creeks. I wouldn't want the same gator to get startled from only 3 feet away and hit my board in his haste to get away. He might knock me off and the last place I want to be is in a small body of water with a scared alligator, so I avoid places where I could accidentally be knocked off my board, like narrow canals.

### **Stay Alert and Aware**

Lastly you want to stay alert and be aware of your surroundings. Take care where you launch your stand up paddle board. You will want to use a bank or preferably a dock that doesn't show signs of a nesting or sunning gator nearby. Ask around before launching in an unfamiliar location.

Once on your board keep away from places where alligators could be startled and feel cornered. These include narrow channels, canals and creeks as well as blind bends in larger rivers.

Be extra careful when you are near the edge of the water. This is where alligators love to ambush their prey. Don't be prey. Don't linger by the edge of murky water in alligator country.

### **Tom Walters**

I have lived near the coast most of my life and I love all types of watersports. Stand up Paddleboarding is my favorite way to get out on the water, stay fit and have fun. I am the founder of FitFunSUP.com