

They may look frozen, but these gators aren't dead — they're just chilling

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Thanks to brumation, cold-blooded animals like alligators can survive a winter submerged in ice. Photo: IrinaK/Shutterstock Photo: IrinaK/Shutterstock

During the hot, muggy months, the alligators that live in the American South are on the move. They go into swimming pools and scare people as they roam around in suburban neighborhoods. But when the temperature drops, they're just chilling. For real.

In 2024, much of the United States got really cold in the third week of January. Lakes, ponds and swamps froze. That's when you could spot alligators in North Carolina and Texas in their coolest winter look.

The animals submerge their bodies under the ice, with just their noses poking out to breathe. People watched online videos of the seemingly frozen alligators, or gator-cicles, in amazement. But even though the alligators may look frozen solid, they are very much alive.

Gator-cicles

Alligators are pretty cool to begin with. They are big reptiles. Reptiles are animals with backbones that have scales instead of hair or feathers. Like all reptiles, alligators are cold-blooded. That means temperature of the environment determines their body temperature.

Alligators control their body temperatures by sunning themselves when they need to warm up. When they want to cool down, they go to shaded areas or cooler water.

But the gator-cicles are a whole different thing. Here, alligators are going into brumation. This is the reptile version of hibernation, which is the process where animals pass the winter in a resting state. Brumation, like hibernation, allows animals to survive extremely cold temperatures.

The Swamp Park is an organization in Ocean Isle Beach, North Carolina, that cares for rescued alligators. The organization posted a video in January showing scary-looking alligators beneath the water's frozen surface.

In the video, a staff member explained what was going on. He said that when it gets cold enough for the water to ice over, a gator will tilt its nose up to peek just out of the water. That way, the animal can keep breathing even under the ice.

"Think of it as a cute little danger snorkel," he said. The Swamp Park later posted another video that showed a gator-cicle slowly but surely starting to thaw out.

Hibernation, Brumation

Alligators can be found as far north as North Carolina and as far west as eastern Texas. Like other cold-blooded animals, they go into brumation in the winter months.

Brumation is similar to hibernation, but it is different in certain ways. Animals that truly hibernate appear to be in a deep sleep. It's just about impossible to wake them up. Reptiles, on the other hand, will move around on warmer winter days. You might, for example, spot a lizard out on a rock during January. It's getting some sun to warm itself.

Eric Nordberg is a reptile expert. He works at the University of New England in Australia. He said that during brumation, reptiles reduce their body temperature. They slow their heart rate and breathing. In doing so, they're saving energy when they can't be looking for food or mates due to cold temperatures.

Some alligators will make and stay in mud holes on colder days. Others make do in the freezing water. The point is, they're surviving the cold. As the Swamp Park said, "the key to life is adaptation." Adaptation is a change in a living thing that helps it survive in its environment.

The Swamp Park has had alligators in brumation before. In 2018, their alligators brumated during a cold snap. The frozen alligators made the news then, too.



Image 1. This alligator was found chilling in Brazos Bend State Park, Texas. Photo: IrinaK/Shutterstock

Brumation behaviors depend on how long the cold temperatures last in the environment, Nordberg said. In Texas, alligators brumate from mid-October until early March. They are mostly inactive during these colder months.

When the alligators come out of brumation, they are slow and sluggish. It is like they have woken up from a long sleep. Cold reptiles are "very slow and unable to do much of anything" until they warm up, Nordberg said. They warm up mostly "by basking in the sun."

Quiz

- 1 Read the section "Hibernation, Brumation." Which sentence from the section shows people get excited seeing alligators in brumation?
- (A) The point is, they're surviving the cold.
 - (B) The frozen alligators made the news then, too.
 - (C) It is like they have woken up from a long sleep.
 - (D) They warm up mostly "by basking in the sun."
- 2 Read the section "Gator-cicles." Which sentence from the section shows why alligators go into brumation?
- (A) Alligators control their body temperatures by sunning themselves when they need to warm up.
 - (B) This is the reptile version of hibernation, which is the process where animals pass the winter in a resting state.
 - (C) The organization posted a video in January showing scary-looking alligators beneath the water's frozen surface.
 - (D) He said that when it gets cold enough for the water to ice over, a gator will tilt its nose up to peek just out of the water.
- 3 Which sentence from the article supports the main idea of the article?
- (A) But even though the alligators may look frozen solid, they are very much alive.
 - (B) That means temperature of the environment determines their body temperature.
 - (C) The Swamp Park is an organization in Ocean Isle Beach, North Carolina, that cares for rescued alligators.
 - (D) Adaptation is a change in a living thing that helps it survive in its environment.
- 4 Read the paragraph from the article.

Brumation is similar to hibernation, but it is different in certain ways. Animals that truly hibernate appear to be in a deep sleep. It's just about impossible to wake them up. Reptiles, on the other hand, will move around on warmer winter days. You might, for example, spot a lizard out on a rock during January. It's getting some sun to warm itself.

Which statement summarizes the paragraph?

- (A) Unlike hibernating animals, animals that brumate sometimes move around during winter.
- (B) It is nearly impossible wake up an animal that is in the resting period of hibernation.
- (C) Reptiles like to lay out in the sun when possible during the time of brumation.
- (D) Both hibernating and brumating animals can look like animals that are in a very deep sleep.