

A close-up photograph of an alligator's head, showing its textured scales and sharp teeth. The background is blurred with warm, golden bokeh lights, suggesting a sunset or night scene. A white rounded rectangle is overlaid on the upper part of the image, containing the text 'The South'. Another white rounded rectangle is at the bottom, containing the 'beanstack originals' logo.

# The South

 **beanstack** originals





# The South

*The southern United States is home to wild and diverse creatures, from alligators to bears.*



The American South has many habitats, or natural environments, such as busy swamps, beautiful beaches, and watery marshes. It is also full of amazing animals! Read on to meet some of the wonderful creatures of the South.

## *American Alligator*

American alligators are right at home in the American South. In fact, they've been living there longer than humans! The first alligators evolved during the time of the dinosaurs about 245 million years ago. They continue to thrive today, living most often in freshwater habitats like the rivers, lakes, ponds, swamps, and other aquatic environments in the southern United States. These reptiles aren't as large as some of their dinosaur relatives—but they're certainly not small. Ranging from 10 to 15 feet (3 to 4.6 m), adult male alligators can weigh as much as 1,000 pounds (453.6 kg), about one-third the weight of a small car.

American alligators are known for their ferocious bite, and for good reason: their jaws are strong enough to crack through a turtle's shell. An alligator isn't picky about its meals, though. On top of turtles, it will eat birds, amphibians, mammals, and more—

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

**You can tell a crocodile and an alligator apart by their snouts: A crocodile has a V-shaped snout, while an alligator's snout is U-shaped.**



## Animals Across America: The South



basically, any animal that wanders too close to the water's edge. Its excellent hunting skills make this animal one of the top predators, or animals that eat other animals, in its local food chain, which is a term used to describe the relationship between animals that eat one another. That's right—they might be lurking low in the water, but alligators are on top!



*A West Indian manatee swims along the southern coast of the U.S.*

### West Indian Manatee

With its large eyes and whiskered snout, a manatee looks something like a cross between a dog and a walrus. In fact, it's neither! Manatees are marine mammals that are most closely related to elephants. However, they don't weigh quite as much as their distant cousins; at 1,200 pounds (340 kg), the West Indian manatee is only about one-tenth as heavy as an African elephant.

West Indian manatees spend their time grazing on sea grasses, like seaweed and kelp, which gives them their nickname: sea cows. They're found along the southern coasts of the U.S., where they stay comfortable in the warm waters. Their bodies also help them thrive in their watery homes. Manatees use their flippers and paddle-like tail to steer, and can even use their flippers to "walk" along shallow ocean shores. Though they can stay underwater for up to 15 minutes at a time, they do need to come to the surface to breathe, like all aquatic mammals. Luckily, manatees have many layers of fat, or blubber, that keep them buoyant, or able to float easily.



## Animals Across America: The South



A black bear searching for berries.

### Black Bear

Common across much of North America, black bears can be found throughout the southern U.S. Compared to grizzlies or polar bears, black bears are known for their smaller, stocky bodies, and longer, less-rounded ears. And although they are called black bears, they're not always black! Their coats can range from black to brown, red-brown, blue-gray, and more. Many even have splashes of white across their chests.

#### FUN FACT

**Black bears can sometimes be white.**

Black bears spend much of their time searching for food. They are omnivores, meaning that they eat both meat and vegetables. Their diet includes every-

thing from fish to deer, and from berries to plant roots. No matter what they're eating, black bears must eat a lot of it to prepare for the winters. Once the cold weather sets in, most bears begin to hibernate. During this process, a bear's heart rate and breathing slows, and the bear must survive on the fat it's stored up over the year until it emerges in the springtime. Sleep tight, bear!

### Nine-Banded Armadillo

Of the 20 species of armadillo, only one calls the U.S. home: the nine-banded armadillo, which is the state animal of Texas! Like all armadillos, the nine-banded armadillo is known for its tough,



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*A nine-banded armadillo's bony armor helps protect it from predators like black bears and alligators.*

armor-like shell. In fact, the word armadillo is Spanish for “little armored one.” This shell helps keep the armadillo safe from predators. However, contrary to popular belief, the nine-banded armadillo cannot curl up into a ball. Instead, when it's frightened, it jumps high into the air. This surprises predators, allowing the armadillo to scurry away.

Unlike some other armadillo species, the nine-banded armadillo is fairly small, growing to about the size of a small dog. It uses its strong claws to dig in the earth for its food, which includes insects and grubs. Once it finds a tasty snack, the armadillo slurps it up with its long tongue. Delicious!