



Dwarf Caiman

Kingdom: Animalia
 Phylum: Chordata
 Subphylum: Vertebrata
 Class: Reptilia
 Order: Crocodylia
 Family: Alligatoridae
 Genus: *Paleosuchus*
 Species: *palpebrosus*



Photo courtesy of Karen Marzynski

Habitat

- **In the Wild:** The dwarf caiman is found along the upper Amazon River of South America and in Paraguay's river systems. They typically live in flooded forests around major lakes.
- **Exhibit Location:** USS Antiquities - Tropical River Exhibit

Characteristics

- Length: 5 feet (males); 4 feet (females)
- Caimans are more closely related to alligators than other crocodylians.
- *Paleosuchus palpebrosus* is the smallest of all caiman species.
- The caiman "armor" is made up of rough, horny scales along the back and tail. Bony plates strengthen the back scales.
- The skull of the caiman is long. The eye sockets and nostrils are set high on the skull so it can float with just the nose and eyes above the water.
- Caiman snouts are rather short and broad. They turn up at the end, keeping the nostrils out of the water.
- The teeth on the lower jaw are largely invisible when the mouth is closed. The front teeth interlock. Caiman cannot chew. If prey is too large to swallow, they have to tear off bite-sized pieces.
- Caiman have a long body with short legs. The legs have 5 toes on the front feet and 4 toes on the back feet. The back feet are slightly webbed for swimming. Their legs are attached to the sides of the body, which aids in running fast on land.
- Unlike most reptiles, a caiman does not shed its skin in one piece in order to grow. Instead, it sheds each scale separately replacing it with a larger one.
- **Lifespan: In the Wild** Unknown; **In Captivity** 30-40 years

Behaviors

- Dwarf caiman are nocturnal (active at night).
- Caimans are noisier than alligators. They make a variety of growling, croaking and snorting noises.
- When a caiman dives, it can close off its nostrils, windpipe and throat. This enables it to catch prey under water while swimming, without the risk of drowning.
- **Enrichments at the Zoo:** Food items

Reproduction

- Females build mounds out of fresh vegetation, soil and leaf litter to nest their hard-shelled eggs.
- The females lay 30-50 eggs in each nest.
- The gender of the hatchlings is determined by slight temperature changes during the early stages of incubation.
- After about 3 months, young caimans are hatched fully formed and able to fend for themselves.

Diet

- **In the Wild:** juveniles - insects; adults - water snails, fish, mammals, birds
- **At the Zoo:** aquatic carnivorous diet, rats

Conservation Status

- **IUCN status:** Low risk/Least concern; **CITES Appendix II**
- Dwarf caiman have very tough scales, not useable for leather.
- Threats to their existence come more from habitat destruction and pollution (for example, through gold mining activities).
- Although legal subsistence hunting and collection for the pet trade (commercially in Guyana) reduce crocodile densities in local areas of some countries, there is no evidence that the populations have been significantly depleted in those areas.
- Predators: eggs & young – large rats, raccoons, birds, snakes, other caiman
adults – large boas, jaguars, humans

Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- The RGZ currently has 3 female dwarf caimans acquired from National Zoological Park and Rio Grand Zoo.
- The dwarf caiman is also known as Cuvier's dwarf caiman.
- *Paleosuchus* means "ancient crocodile;" *palpebrosus* means "bony eyelid."

Children's Books (* - can be found in RGZ Children's Library)

- *Mother Crocodile = Maman –Caiman* by Birago Diop Reading Level Ages 4-8
- *How Iwariwa the Cayman Learned to Share: A Yanomami Myth* by George Crespo Reading Level Ages 4-8

Sources:

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