



Australia has a few animals that can be extremely dangerous, and the crocodile is high up on that list. You'll find them in the northern parts of Australia, and as the statistics will tell you, they can, and do attack and kill humans.

That said, with a bit of caution, understanding and common sense you'll be able to safely explore the stunning northern parts of Australia like thousands of others every year with minimal risk.

Having grown up in Perth, WA, my understanding of crocodiles was fairly limited prior to a few trips to the Kimberley and Northern Territory. I picked up a lot of interesting information from various crocodile parks, tour guides, northern locals and the indigenous people and I want to share it with you. You should have a healthy fear of crocodiles and play it safe, but they are very misunderstood too.



Freshwater crocodiles relaxing at a croc park in Darwin.

Types of crocodiles

Let's start right at the very beginning, and talk about the different crocs we have here in Australia. You get two types – the fresh water, and the estuarine (or saltwater).

Freshwater crocs are much smaller and have a very narrow head to snout. It's rare to see them over 3 metres long. These are only found in fresh water, and unless provoked are timid animals. If you visit Windjana Gorge on the Gibb River Road, you can see hundreds of them bathing on the side of the water, or floating the day away. As soon as you get within about 3 metres of them they take off, away from you.



You will likely see freshwater crocs floating the day away.

Tunnel Creek (just up the road from Windjana) is home to a few freshwater crocodiles, and you'll see their eyes when you walk through the tunnel and water. Thousands of people do this every year, and never have a problem with them; they just move out of the way and do their own thing.

There have been a few people attacked by freshwater crocodiles, but it's due to antagonising them or getting too close. These have incredibly sharp teeth and will do serious damage if they bite you, so leave them alone and they will do the same.



A couple of freshwater crocs sunbathing at Windjana Gorge.

Estuarine (or saltwater crocodiles)

The saltwater crocodile is on the other end of the spectrum. They can grow up to 7 metres long and are incredibly dangerous. A number of people have been killed by Salties over the years, and plenty more wounded. They are patient, cunning and sneaky animals that have very few weaknesses.

Despite the name, saltwater crocodiles can be found anywhere there is water. This includes freshwater lakes, creeks, rivers and billabongs.



The saltwater species are extremely dangerous animals.



The real difference between fresh and saltwater crocodiles

On a tour in Kakadu National Park, the difference between freshwater crocodiles and salties was put very clearly, and concisely. If you were to fall into the water, fresh water crocodiles would swim away from you, and saltwater crocodiles would swim towards you looking for an easy meal.



While on a boat cruise in Kakadu, it was made clear what separates the species.

Where do you find wild crocodiles?

You'll find Crocodiles anywhere from Port Hedland in Western Australia all the way around the northern coast and back down just south of Brisbane. The further north you go the more common they are, but anywhere between Broome and Gladstone, they are relatively common.

Due to an increase in numbers, crocodiles are being found further and further south every year, so always be on the lookout.



Northern Australia is an incredible place to visit, but it is where crocs are found.

What do crocodiles mean for travelling in the north?

If you are exploring the magic country of Northern Australia, it means you need to pay attention, be careful and don't take risks near water. Crocodiles are very dangerous and will continue to attack and kill people who are in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Where do you need to be cautious?

Crocodiles live near water. Any time you are near billabongs, creeks, rivers, the beach or other swimming holes in the northern part of Australia you should be aware that there is a chance of a crocodile living nearby.



Always be cautious around water and when swimming.

The wet and dry season

If you aren't familiar with the seasons in the northern part of Australia, here's a quick rundown. From December to March it's hot and pours with rain. From May to November it's dry, with warm days.

The wet season plays a big role in where you will find Crocodiles. After a lot of rain, water levels rise dramatically and crocodiles spread out significantly. As the dry season goes on and the water levels dry up they are more restricted and tend to head back to the larger water bodies.



What it means though, is that late in the wet season/early on in the dry season there is a much higher chance of seeing crocodiles outside of where they might normally be. It takes time for the national parks, rangers and property owners to deem each swimming hole safe before opening it to the public after every wet season, so take extra caution early on.



Malcolm Douglas Crocodile Park in Broome.

Crocodile traps

One of the more common signs of crocodile activity in the northern parts of Australia are traps. These are usually big, floating aluminium cages with some form of meat tied to the inside. The crocodile enters the cage and the door shuts behind them. These are then relocated.

You'll find crocodile traps all over the place, including the very highly frequented swimming holes like Berry Springs near Darwin and Bitter Springs in Mataranka. Saltwater crocodiles are frequently removed from popular swimming locations.

If there aren't traps, another popular method is to use a foam float. This is just tied somewhere and checked regularly. Crocodiles will bite these, and the bites are used to tell if anything has come through.



A big crocodile up in Broome.

What can you do to stay safe from crocodiles?

Crocodile attacks can be avoided. If you do the following, your risk of a crocodile attack is almost completely removed.

1. Read and obey the signs

Where tourism is common, signs are located telling you of crocodiles in the area, and where it is safe to swim.



Obey the signs that you come across.

2. No signs does not mean it's safe

If you can't see any signs, that doesn't mean the water body is safe. There's no way signs can be put up and maintained everywhere, and if you are off the beaten track there will be no signs. Always assume a crocodile could be living in the water and you'll be just fine.

3. Listen to your gut

Your gut feeling is usually pretty good. If you don't feel comfortable near the water, there's a reason for it. Trust your instinct.



Fishing like this is super dangerous.

4. Stay back from the water's edge

The croc safe campaign in the northern parts of Australia says to stay a minimum of 5 metres away from the water's edge. If you've seen how fast a crocodile moves, you'd stay a lot further away than that.

5. Don't clean fish near the water

If you catch fish (and the fishing up north is unreal) don't clean them near the water. Take your catch well away and do it there, and dispose of the offal intelligently.



When fishing, keep a safe distance and clean your fish away from the water.

6. Put your food away

Leaving food out is a sure way to attract unwanted attention, so put it away.

7. Don't swim if you can't see the bottom

If you can't see the bottom of the water you want to swim in, it's an absolute no for swimming. Crocodiles love muddy, dirty water and if you can't see very clearly where you are walking and swimming, they could be hiding anywhere.



Take responsibility for your safety, and read signs carefully.

8. Accept the risk for yourself, and weigh it up

At the end of the day, you are responsible for your safety. Some signs will say 'this is a known crocodile area', and that it has been cleared, but there's nothing stopping a crocodile moving into the area after the area has been deemed croc-free.

Every time you hop in the water up north, do so at your own risk knowing that there could be a croc there. The chances in popular tourist swimming holes are very limited, but it's still a risk that you have to consider and accept.

Common crocodile attacks

The most common crocodile attacks are men, and usually locals. They've been around crocodiles for a long time, and become haphazard and careless. All it takes is to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and you'll be dinner for a big Salty.



Saltwater crocodiles are not to be messed with, but you should still respect them.



Don't hate the croc

Just like sharks, when you enter their backyard you are accepting the risk. More and more people are travelling up north and that means more contact with crocodiles. They are just living their lives and looking for an easy meal.

Have a healthy fear and respect for them, use your common sense and gut, and don't take unnecessary risks. Missing out on a nice refreshing swim is hardly a price to pay when compared to what would happen if you were attacked.

The northern parts of Australia have some of the best places to visit in the country, but do so with a full appreciation for what may also be there!

Have you ever spotted a croc in the wild, or even encountered one?