



BOAR CROC used enlarged jaw muscles to sink its lethal fangs deep into dinosaurian prey. With differentiated teeth and a soft nose pointing forward, DogCroc may have been an omnivore that used its lanky limbs to escape larger meat-eating dinosaurs. A pair of buckteeth in the lower jaw of RatCroc may have

SAHARAN CROC MENAGERIE

DINOSAURS WERE NOT the only casualties by the close of the Cretaceous period 65 million years ago. A spectacular array of crocs, from plant-eating dwarfs to dinosaur-eating giants, once romped with, and sometimes devoured, dinosaurs. After the great asteroid fell, only more conservative, water-bound crocs survived as relicts of a glorious past.

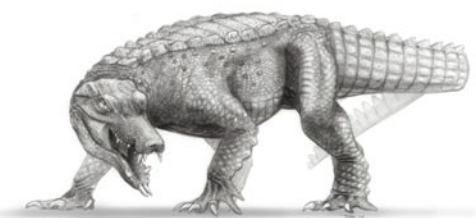
Gondwana, the southern landmass, was home to exotic dinosaur-age crocs, their fossilized bones now poking from parched landscapes on continents like Africa. Amid dune fields in the Sahara, I had unearthed a menagerie of new croc species.

In some ways my fossil trove resembled living crocs. All had textured skull bones and slow-growing body armor suitable for basking at water's edge. In other ways they resembled mammals. Some had erect limbs for fleet-footed pursuit of prey on land, teeth divided into incisors, canines and post-canines, and forwardly pointing eyes, earning nicknames such as RatCroc, DogCroc and BoarCroc.

What was their lifestyle? Were they landlubbers or sub-aquatic like their living kin? I felt answers might be found in northern Australia, home to the "Freshy", or freshwater croc. Unlike other living species, this croc gallops. I saw the Freshy's body and tail at full gallop moving in sinuous motion up and down like a terrestrial runner. At water's edge, its body and tail suddenly moved side-to-side like a fish, propelling it underwater.

While watching this croc gymnast, I suddenly realized that skilled locomotion on land and in water lay at the core of crocodile evolution. Although crocs made their debut in the Triassic as small, land-based predators, they soon evolved the muscle-bound, paddle-shaped tail of a swimmer. My African crocs had both—agile legs and a capable tail.

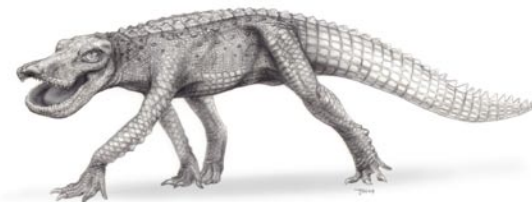
The ability to move with agility and speed on land and in water may have driven the explosion of Cretaceous crocs across Gondwana. Under the nose of the dinosaurs, crocs evolved into ferocious predators and pint-sized plant-eaters, retreating when pressed to watery hideaways. A distinctive croc survival strategy had emerged that even a monstrous asteroid could not completely erase. —Paul Sereno



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Lorem ipsum amaging, too, has been a brown dog jumping over another croc where we see the only on **National Geographic Channel, November 2x at 9 p.m. in the U.S.**

Get to know into digital photography at nmg.com/interactive/crocs