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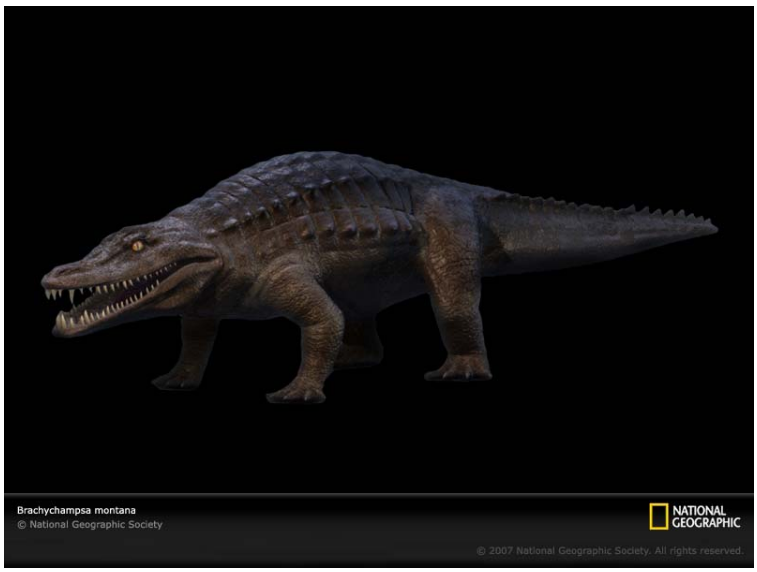
National Geographic

Brachychampsa Montana



This freshwater, **carnivorous** **reptile** is among the very earliest alligatoroids known to science. The first *Brachychampsa* fossil was discovered in Montana's Hell Creek Formation—an ancient suite of rocks that was laid down near the end of the Cretaceous period. That individual animal lived not so long before the Cretaceous-Tertiary **extinction** that wiped out many of Earth's species some 65 million years ago.

Brachychampsa had short teeth and a large mouth that packed more power than those of living gators. These oral characteristics suggest that *Brachychampsa* may have **preyed on** turtles, which were very common in the Hell Creek fauna.

The first alligator ancestors **evolved** some 245 million years ago. About 80 million years ago, during the Cretaceous period, crocodilians appeared. This group includes alligatoroids, such as *Brachychampsa*, as well as their close relatives the crocodiles and caimans.

Many of these ancient animals were survivors of the Cretaceous-Tertiary extinction, though no one knows why they lived when so many others **perished**.

Modern alligators are still closely related to their ancient ancestors and look much like their **relatives** did 80 million years ago.