

# San Francisco Chronicle

THE LARGEST DAILY CIRCULATION IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

## Bay Area

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE AND SFGATE.COM | Tuesday, September 14, 2010 | Section C \*\*\*\*\*

September 14, 2010



Photos by Michelle Gachet / The Chronicle

Jack Kim and son Jack Lim, 9, watch Claude take a swim Sunday at the California Academy of Sciences. The albino alligator is turning 15 and the academy is having a party Wednesday.

### SCIENCE

# 15 candles for Claude

By Julian Guthrie

CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

In the wild, he would have been someone's lunch. But at the California Academy of Sciences, Claude the albino alligator is a star.

He gets three private training sessions a week, followed by 15 fish pellets. The food is tossed inches from his jaw, so he doesn't have to search. His favorite rock is heated to varying temperatures, from 78 degrees to 95 degrees.

On Wednesday, Claude — born Sept. 15, 1995, in Florida and weighing 2 ounces — will be feted with a birthday party, complete with cake, party hats and song. Everyone is invited.

"Beyond his albinism, which adds interest, Claude is pretty cool," said Brian Friermuth, a biologist and one of Claude's handlers. "He's a quick study."

He's also a huge draw, and a teaching tool for everything from the environment to evolution, noted Carol

*Claude continues on C3*



Claude is happier with the swamp to himself; the other alligator, Bonnie, was sent back to Florida after she bit him last year.

## BAY AREA

# On his own at 15, and loving it

*Claude from page C1*

Tang, the academy's director of public programs.

"There are no white alligators in the wild because they're too show-offy," Tang said of the milky white skin. "They get eaten in the wild. So, you can use that to talk about food chains and adaptation. You can talk about how alligators are green because they live in the swamp where there are plants and trees and they can be camouflaged."

She added, "You can also use Claude to talk about variation, which is the fuel of evolution. It's one mutation in Claude's DNA that causes this kind of albinism. That shows how sensitive our DNA can be. We only know of a couple dozen white alligators in the world, and they are in captivity."

The California Academy of Sciences — which includes an

aquarium, planetarium and natural history museum — reopened in its gleaming new site in Golden Gate Park on Sept. 27, 2008. The academy's tradition of a live alligator display, though, dates to the opening of the Steinhart Aquarium on Sept. 29, 1923.

"Some of the things we've done in Golden Gate Park since the 1910s were groundbreaking in terms of how museums brought nature alive," said Tang. "It's always been about how to talk to people about nature."

Claude came to the academy in time for its 2008 reopening from a farm in Florida, and for more than a year had a tank mate — a green alligator named Bonnie, who had been "personality tested" for him. That relationship ended badly on a Saturday night in early 2009 when Bonnie bit Claude on his right front foot.

"Because he is albino, he has reduced vision. Claude would go into the water and bump into things, and Bonnie would snap at him," said his handler Freiermuth, standing next to the swamp where Claude was in the 78-degree water with his head against the glass.

The Jan. 3 chomping of Claude's foot was apparently the final straw. On March 24, Bonnie was returned to a farm in Florida.

"Claude has been more active since Bonnie left," Freiermuth said. "He is better by himself, as he was stressed out with her there. He has interactions with his turtles. He is eating well. He knows his name and responds to whistle commands."

At his annual physical exam in late July, he weighed in at 181 pounds and measured 8 feet 5 inches long. He has 76 teeth. If all goes well, he could live to be 80 years old in the comforts of

## Birthday party for Claude

**What:** Claude the albino alligator's 15th birthday party

**Where:** The California Academy of Sciences, Golden Gate Park

**When:** 9:30 a.m., Wednesday.

**Entrance fee:** The academy will be free to the public Wednesday.

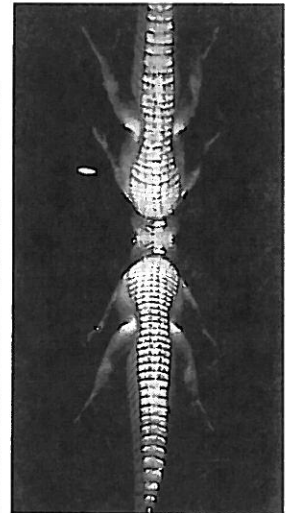
**For the gator who has everything:** Claude will receive 15 fish-shaped cupcakes made of gator chow and decorated with fruit and flowers by children who share Claude's birthday.

**What else:** Children will have a chance to meet a costumed Claude character and participate in crafts in the Naturalist Center: coloring in a birthday cake for Claude and making an alligator-inspired birthday hat.

**For information:** [www.calacademy.org](http://www.calacademy.org), (415) 379-8000.

the academy.

For now, typical to his teenager status, he has been in-



Michelle Gachet / The Chronicle

**Claude's reflection is his only tank mate with Bonnie gone.**

creasingly assertive. He even let out his very first roar — thought to be a mating roar.

"He's 15," Freiermuth shrugged. "A young man."

E-mail Julian Guthrie at [jguthrie@sfchronicle.com](mailto:jguthrie@sfchronicle.com).