



VENOMOUS SNAKES FACT SHEET SERIES

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Copperhead

Agkistrodon contortrix

The most commonly encountered venomous snake, copperheads can be encountered even in cities. They are shy and adaptable.

Description

Copperheads are well known for their camouflage colors of brown tones. They are thick snakes with keeled scales. The background color is some shade of tan or brown, with darker brown hourglass or 'Hershey's Kiss' shapes overlaid. There may or may not be dark spots inside the hourglasses or in the lighter areas between. The widest parts of the pattern are on the sides, with the narrowest parts along the midline of the back. The head is angular and very distinct from the neck, and golden or coppery colored. As pit vipers, they have a pit for sensing heat on their upper lip in between their nostril and their eye. Copperheads are usually between 24 and 30 inches in length, but the largest on record is 52 inches. Newborns look just like adults, but the pattern is a bit duller or grayish looking. Juvenile snakes have a bright yellow-green tail tip until they are about a year old. This is used as a caudal lure to attract potential prey.



Photo by Berkeley Boone

Range & Habitat

The copperhead can be found throughout most of Georgia, with the exception of the southeastern corner. Their range in the United States is wide, covering most of the eastern seaboard, through the central states and over to west Texas. Copperheads from the mountainous areas in the northern part of the state tend to be darker and more richly colored than the paler and softer colored individuals found in the southern parts of the state. They are most commonly seen in forested areas, particularly mixed hardwoods, but tend to shy away from open areas. Areas with rocks or rock piles are favored as well, and copperheads may occasionally be found in lowland riverine or swamp areas.

Myth & Legend

A common misconception is that copperheads smell like cucumbers, and that if that is smelled in the woods, a snake is nearby. While copperheads do have a unique scent to their musk, it does not smell like cucumbers, nor does it mean that a copperhead is near. It is widely reported that juvenile copperheads are more dangerous than the adults because they cannot control how much venom they release in a bite. This is untrue however. Copperheads of any age are capable of controlling the amount of venom given in a bite, and 'dry bites' (where no venom is given) occur frequently with this species. Their venom is also the weakest among

our native venomous species, and human death is nearly unheard of. Copperheads are also said to be found in pairs. While it is possible to find multiple snakes in an area, this misconception likely comes from finding snakes together simply because the location had ample food or desirable shelter options.

Similar Looking Species

Because of similar coloration, harmless corn snakes are occasionally confused with copperheads. However, corn snakes are longer and slender and have smooth, shiny scales. Corn snakes also have an elongated head, and square blotches with black outlines going down the back.

Corn snakes also tend to feature more red, orange and yellow colors against a grayish or brownish background. Northern water snakes are also confused with copperheads because of their two-toned brown colors, but water snakes have a pattern that is more squared, and wider at the top than on the sides. They are also found in and along waterways almost exclusively.



Harmless corn snakes have square blotches, a rectangular head and a long slender body. Photo by Berkeley Boone

Natural History

The copperhead's simple camouflage scheme is incredibly effective. Another method that is employed is sitting motionless. These two things render the snakes essentially invisible to animals or people that are not actively looking for them. Captives can live for over twenty years, and wild snakes are known to live over fifteen years. Copperheads rely on environmental temperatures and conditions for their body temperature, and they are



The heat-sensitive pit (lower arrow) is located between the nostril (upper arrow) and the eye. Photo by Berkeley Boone

unable to regulate it on their own. During cooler weather, copperheads enter a period of dormancy. The snakes utilize rock and boulder piles, crevices, hollow logs or woodpiles as shelter. On warm days they may emerge to bask in the sun. Though they do not have rattles on the tail, copperheads will vigorously rattle their tails creating noise as it hits dried grass or leaves. Copperheads are just as likely to sit and wait for prey to come by them as they are to actively search for it. Breeding seasons occur in the spring and the late summer, and babies are born in late summer or early fall. Litter size is usually less than ten. Juveniles will wiggle the bright yellow tail tip, hoping to lure in potential prey with the movement. Prey consists of frogs, lizards and small mice.

Large invertebrates are also eaten, and copperheads are also well known for eating cicadas as they emerge on summer nights. Raccoons, opossums, coyotes and kingsnakes are all predators of copperheads.

Conservation

Having a widespread distribution, copperheads seem to be abundant and have stable populations. They are still unnecessarily feared though and killed frequently by humans. Being run over while trying to cross roads is another common issue that can negatively affect populations.