



VENOMOUS SNAKES FACT SHEET SERIES

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Eastern Coral Snake

Micrurus fulvius

Eastern Coral Snakes are members of the Elapidae family and are relatives to the more famous cobras and mambas.

Description

Coral snakes are long and slender-bodied. Typically, females grow longer than males, capable of reaching nearly 3 feet. Males are generally around 2 feet. The longest recorded length is just over 47 inches. The thin body is covered in smooth, shiny scales that give the appearance of being highly polished. The red, black and yellow rings circle the body completely. The red and black bands are generally the same width and are separated by narrower yellow bands. The red bands often have black spotting. The head is blunt and rounded, just wider than the neck, and the snout is black, with a wide yellow band just behind the eyes. The tail is banded in only black and yellow. Juveniles are patterned just like adults but are only about 8 inches long when they hatch.



Photo by Berkeley Boone

Range & Habitat

In Georgia, coral snakes are mainly found in the Coastal Plain, though there is a population that occurs in the lower Piedmont along the Flint River basin. There are wide gaps in their documented range, and animals have not been found in the predicted range even though the habitat may seem ideal. Their range in the United States runs from southeastern North Carolina to extreme eastern Louisiana. Their preferred habitat has well-drained, sandy soil with areas of open ground. Longleaf pine stands, sandhills and pine flatwoods are the favored ecosystems. Coral snakes do not tolerate low-lying areas or wet soils. Animal burrows, particularly those of gopher tortoises, and rotten logs and stumpholes may be used as refuge.

Myth & Legend

Popular legend states that the coral snake is rear-fanged, and can only envenomate a person if they can get their mouth around something small and soft, such as the edge of a hand, or the slight webbing between fingers or toes. This is not true at all. Coral snakes have short, fixed fangs at the front of their mouths. They are fully capable of biting anywhere on a person's body and should not be handled or touched. Being elapids, they have a dangerously potent venom, comprised mainly of neurotoxins which affects the connections between the brain and muscles, and could eventually lead to paralysis and respiratory or cardiac failure.

Similar Looking Species

There are two other non-venomous snakes that are often confused with coral snakes. Both species are found in Georgia. The scarlet kingsnake (*Lampropeltis triangulum elapsoides*) also has red, black and yellow bands that encircle the body, and looks most similar to the coral snake. However, the kingsnake's snout is red, and the yellow bands are separated from the red bands by black.

The scarlet snake (*Cemophora coccinea*) has the same colors, but has a red, pointed snout, red blotches on the back that are outlined in black, and a smooth white belly. There is a mnemonic phrase along the lines of "red touch black, venom lack; red touch yellow, kill a fellow". However, because of misremembering of that rhyme, there is often confusion as to which species is truly harmless and which one could be extremely dangerous. The best advice is to leave alone any snake that is found, especially ones that are not easily identified.



**Notice the pattern of the bands on this harmless Scarlet Kingsnake.
Photo by Berkeley Boone**

Natural History

Coral snakes are considered to be a nocturnal species, but in fact can be found active on the surface at any time day or night. Dawn and dusk seem to be high activity periods. Spring is often a time of high surface activity for male snakes, and in fall, females are often active. These snakes are secretive and fossorial, spending much of their time digging through loose soil or leaf litter, or completely underground. Coral snakes are poikilothermic, meaning that they cannot maintain their own body temperatures, they are dependent on surrounding temperatures and conditions for their body temperature. They may enter a period of inactivity over the winter. If so, they stay in burrows or other subterranean chambers. Courtship and mating occur in late spring. Coral snakes are the only venomous snakes in the US that lay eggs. Little is known about the actual process of egg-laying, though 3–10 eggs is typical. Eggs are laid in summer, in old stumps or rotting logs where moisture levels and temperatures are adequate for incubation. The brightly banded babies hatch in late summer and disperse immediately. Life spans in the wild are not well known, but captives have been known to live for almost ten years. Coral snakes actively pursue their prey, which consists of other reptiles. Favored foods are smaller snakes, skinks and legless lizards. The predators will nose around through leaf litter, loose bark and soil until they locate a potential prey item. Once found, it is grabbed and envenomated, where the fast-acting toxin soon paralyzes the prey. Predators are birds like hawks and shrikes, as well as indigo snakes, racers, coachwhips and kingsnakes.

Conservation

The eastern coral snake appears to be somewhat common in the places from which it has been recorded. It needs better documentation in other portions of its range to better determine population levels. The biggest threats to coral snakes include human persecution and habitat loss and destruction. The snakes are often killed out of fear or perceived danger. The well-draining upland areas that are the favored habitat for the coral snakes make good land for farming practices and land for silviculture.