



Venomous SNAKES of Alabama

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[Editor's Note: As a follow-up to the article regarding "non-venomous" snakes published in the Fall 2012 issue (page 15), we felt it only fair in this Spring issue to provide information on a few "others" we might have more reason to avoid. . .]

No species of native wildlife in Alabama receives more of a bad rap than snakes. While some people are infatuated by them, many only want to see them dead. Misconceptions about snakes and their bad reputation mainly stems from a lack of knowledge about the different snakes that inhabit our state.

Alabama serves as host for approximately 42 species of snakes, of which only six are venomous. Five of the six belong to a group termed "pit vipers" which includes the cottonmouth,

the copperhead, and three rattlesnakes. The sixth, in a group by itself, is the coral snake.

Pit vipers reside in the family *Viperidae*, characterized by curved, hollow moveable fangs that can pivot to be held flat against the roof of the mouth, heat-sensing pits located between the eye and nostril, and hemotoxic venom. Practically enhancing the snake's ability to see in the dark, the heat-sensitive pits are primarily utilized for detecting prey. Their pupils are elliptical in a vertical orientation, and they typically have a triangular-shaped head (although some non-venomous water snakes will flatten their head and resemble this characteristic when alarmed or disturbed).



Water moccasin

The **cottonmouth** is a common snake of Alabama's landscapes, particularly around any type of water body including lakes, rivers, streams, and swamplands [and is also referred to as a water moccasin]. The name cottonmouth is derived from its white inner mouth which is often exposed when the snake is disturbed. While the young have bright bands of dark brown to olive-brown, the adults appear to lose the bands as they age, leaving them a darker solid brown to black with faint blotches. The young typically have a chartreuse-tipped tail, believed to be used to attract prey. The cottonmouth has a habit of standing its ground more so than other snakes.

The **copperhead** is the cottonmouth's upland counterpart. It has a unique coloration characteristic of dark brown bands on a coppery lighter background that resemble an hourglass pattern. This coloration makes it especially hard to detect in the forest leaf, which leads it to be occasionally stepped on by outdoorsmen. This is probably why more people are bitten by this particular snake in the Southeast than any other venomous snake. Although the bites are painful, most are not serious as compared to those of other venomous snake species.



A copperhead, ready to ambush.



Timber rattlesnake

The **timber** or **canebrake rattlesnake** usually occupies similar areas to that of the copperhead, but is also found in areas that are a little wetter. Its coloration also makes it difficult to detect in the forest leaf litter. This snake can vary in color ranging from gray to brown, with dark brown V-shaped bands or "chevrons" evenly spaced down the length of its body. It often remains motionless until it feels it has been discovered. At that time, it initiates its all-too-familiar buzzing signal, warning the intruder to stay away.

The largest rattlesnake in Alabama is the **diamondback rattlesnake**. Record specimens of this species have been documented at lengths of 8 feet. The diamondback prefers drier sites such as the coastal sandy pine forests, pine flatwoods, and upland sandhills. It is often found in association with gopher tortoise burrows, which it frequently utilizes for refuge. The diamondback is typically a hefty snake, with dark brown-to-black diamonds along the length of its back on a lighter tan-to-light yellow background. Acting as an ambush predator, it often sits coiled and motionless for extended periods, waiting for the opportunity to subdue small rodents. Their venom is highly toxic to humans and is likely the most dangerous snake in Alabama, but it is not apt to strike unless it feels threatened or harassed. Nevertheless, it is wise to keep your distance from this snake.

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A well-camouflaged eastern diamondback rattlesnake.

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The smallest of the rattlesnakes in the state is the **pygmy rattlesnake**, often referred to as a ground rattler. Its pugnacious attitude must stem from its small stature, for it is quick to coil and rattle, although its rattle is hardly perceptible. The color pattern of this snake is a light-gray background with dark brown-to-orange blotches along the back. Due to its smallness, a bite would not be a serious threat to an adult human, although it would be a painful experience. However, this quick-tempered snake is swift to coil and strike when disturbed.

The **coral snake** is the only representative in Alabama of the family *Elapidae*. While this family also includes the cobras, the coral snake is a much more docile representative of the family. It is, by far, the most colorful of the venomous snakes in the state. The brightly colored bands of black, yellow, and red are the signature of this snake. The black bands separate the yellow bands, and it typically has a black-tipped nose. (A couple of other non-venomous snakes that resemble the

coral snake are the scarlet snake and scarlet king snake, both of which have black bands that separate red from yellow bands.) Bites from the coral snake are very serious and can cause severe harm due to its neurotoxic venom. Fortunately, these bites are rare, usually associated with someone attempting to handle the snake.

The majority of snake bites occur from individuals harassing or handling snakes. The best advice in regard to avoiding a snake bite is to avoid handling any snake if there is any doubt of its identification. If a bite occurs, present-day recommendations are



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Pygmy Rattlesnake

to seek medical attention as quickly as possible rather than the dated suggestions of cutting, tourniquet application, or sucking the venom from the bite. A cell phone can be a tremendous asset in alerting medical personnel of the incoming bite victim if such an unfortunate incident should occur. Last of all, watch where you step.††

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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Important Survey Participation Opportunity:

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service was recently petitioned to list the eastern diamondback rattlesnake as a threatened or endangered species. The National Council for Air & Stream Improvement, Inc. (NCASI), a non-profit research center that provides technical information on environmental issues for the forest products industry, has developed a survey and is gathering data to improve understanding of the distribution and habitat associations of this species. Anyone encountering an eastern diamondback rattlesnake is encouraged to complete a survey form and submit to NCASI. (For more information, visit www.ncasi.org/snakesurvey.aspx.)

NCASI will be collecting these forms through December 31, 2013. Following that date, data collection will cease and NCASI will compile results from surveys, remove any information that would identify individual respondents and/or landowners as well as precise locations, and provide a summary of results to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

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