

LOUISIANA CRITTER CORNER

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SNAKES

Snakes are an important component of Louisiana's natural heritage but they unfortunately also are a source of much worry and fear among our residents.

The good news is that most snakes found in Louisiana are harmless, and many are beneficial as predators of insects and rodents. They also are a necessary component of the food chain and serve a valuable role in our state's balance of nature.

Individuals who learn to understand and identify the snakes of Louisiana can alleviate much of their fear of snakes.

"To kill or not to kill" often is the question individuals ask themselves when they come upon any snake. Poisonous snakes should be removed from the area of our homes and anywhere we reside with our pets, but any non-poisonous snake found in these settings should be left alone. In many cases, this same "live and let live" philosophy should be extended to all snakes in habitats away from our homes because of the reasons given above.

In Louisiana, we have 40 different species of snakes but only six are poisonous. Identification often is the biggest problem when dealing with snakes, and for that reason, many nonpoisonous species are mistaken for those that are poisonous.

Of our six poisonous species, five are classified as pit vipers (cottonmouth, copperhead, pygmy rattlesnake, timber rattlesnake and eastern diamondback rattlesnake) with distinct characteristics. The loreal pit is an opening found between the eye and nostril of all pit vipers. This structure is used for heat sensing, allowing pit vipers to judge the size and distance of objects.

There is a unique feature that can be used to identify if a snake is one of our poisonous pit vipers, based on how the scales are arranged on the underside of the tail. All pit vipers have tail scales on their underside arranged in a single row, while nonpoisonous snakes have a dividing line with two rows of scales. This feature has proven exceptionally useful in identifying the many "headless" snakes homeowners send over for identification.



cottonmouth ▲

▼ black racer



The triangular-shaped head of the poisonous cottonmouth and the rounded head of the nonpoisonous black racer.

The most useful characteristic for identifying our poisonous pit vipers from a distance is the triangular shape of the head, even when the snake is in a natural and unalarmed state. This characteristic should be used with care, however, since some of our harmless nonpoisonous species will flare their heads when threatened by an approaching individual.

Our only poisonous snake not classified as a pit viper is the colorful coral snake. An easy way to remember the color pattern that distinguishes this snake from the nonpoisonous mimics is by the old rhyme: "Black on yellow, killer fellow; red on black, friendly jack." When the black bands contact the yellow bands on the snake's body, the snake is the poisonous coral snake. When the black bands

contact red bands, the snake is either the harmless scarlet king snake or milk snake. The color patterns on all other snakes tend to differ greatly with age and habitat, making the use of field guides essential for identification.

Precaution is the biggest factor to consider when going into the outdoors and trying to avoid problems with snakes. Most bites in our state and throughout the nation occur when individuals handle snakes. While this would only occur in a bad dream for most folks, the careless step taken without looking or the careless placement of hands in areas that cannot be seen have resulted in individuals being bitten.

For individuals who work in flower beds or vegetable gardens, gloves should be an essential safety item in preventing snake bites when working close to the ground. When leaves and other vegetation are raked into piles and loaded or moved by hand, care should be taken to ensure small snakes are not gathered up with the debris.

The actual bite of a poisonous snake does not necessarily mean poison will be injected into the wound. The discharge of venom is a voluntary response, which means that when striking, a poisonous snake may deliver a "dry bite" in which no venom is injected. Approximately one in five bites to humans is in this category.

Bites from pit vipers are hemorrhagic in nature, breaking down the victim's vascular tissue. Severe pain and swelling are indications venom has been injected from a pit viper. The venom from coral snakes is neurotoxic and affects the central nervous system. In these bites, there may be very little pain or swelling, but without treatment, the loss of involuntary muscles that control breathing and heartbeat can develop.

Individuals vary in their susceptibility to venomous snake bites just as they do in susceptibility to bee or wasp stings. In any case where a bite from a poisonous snake has occurred, the bitten body part should be immobilized and medical attention should be sought as quickly as possible.

Additional treatment steps for pit viper bites include applying a constricting band above the bite area, if medical attention is less than 20 minutes away. This band should never be so tight as to cut off circulation to the bitten body part. If medical attention is more than 20 minutes away and the bite is less than 10 minutes old, small incisions ($\frac{3}{8}$ inch long and $\frac{1}{8}$ inch deep) may be made just above the bite. Fluid may be sucked from the bite and incision – but never orally if open sores are present on or in the mouth.

Control Methods

There are no chemicals labeled for the lethal control of snakes, and those marketed as repellents have drawbacks regarding length of effectiveness and species controlled. Snakes found inside houses or other buildings can be removed by the placement of glue boards around the perimeter of a room where they have been spotted. The No. 1 method to deter snakes is by habitat manipulation. Yards kept free of weeds, tall grass and low spots that hold water will be much less likely to serve as an attractant for snakes to seek food and shelter. Simple routine yard maintenance will do more to deter the presence of snakes in an area than anything else you can do.

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