

MAFES Dawg Tracks



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*Snakes Alive! Identifying Snakes
in Mississippi*



The snake gurus tell us that snakes won't bother you unless you capture or corner them. I don't plan to corner or capture them, either. **They bother me.** Snakes are important members of the natural world and make a significant difference in controlling rats, insects and other species of snakes. Poisonous snakes aren't desirable species of the human habitat. It has long been established that the risk of a poisonous snakebite is lower than that of being struck by lightning. You can further reduce this opportunity or risk of a bite if you will:

- ~Clean up their potential hiding spots and piles of idle debris around the property.
- ~When you are in the woods, wear long pants and boots.
- ~Watch carefully and walk softly in areas where snakes are prone to "hang out."

Most poisonous snakes in the US belong to the pit viper group. Characteristics of the pit vipers are:

- ~Pits on the head ~ Vertical pupils
- ~A triangle head ~ Slim neck
- ~A heavy body with a single row of scales on the underside.

There are two major categories of pit vipers, which are the cottonmouths and copperheads, and there are two major categories of rattlesnakes.

Rattlesnakes – There are many varieties of rattlesnakes that have pit viper characteristics and a button on their tail with two to four segments of rattles for each year of age. Their sizes will range from 15 to 72 inches. The record is an Eastern Diamondback that measured 96 inches.

Copperheads – There are five categories of copperheads that have pit viper characteristics with bands of hourglass markings of brown, copper or red on a tan body. Their sizes range from 20 to 36 inches and they range in size and color depending on the region. All of the young have a yellow tip on their tail. The largest copperhead on record was 56 inches long.

Cottonmouths – The cottonmouth is semi-aquatic with pit viper characteristics. The adult has a solid-colored upper body that is olive, brown or black with a lighter underside. Sometimes it is hard to distinguish between a cottonmouth and a non-poisonous water snake. When a water snake is frightened, it will leave the area, whereas a cottonmouth will raise its head and face off with its intruder. They range in size from 30 to 48 inches. The largest cottonmouth on record was 74 inches.

In south Mississippi, we have coral snakes, which have red and black distinctive stripes and are separated by a yellow stripe. They sometimes are confused with the non-venomous scarlet king snake. Corals have oval heads and round pupils. Their venom is very toxic, but they aren't very aggressive.

Dr. Ben West, Extension Professor of Wildlife and Fisheries for our university states that very few snakes are aggressive. Even when a cottonmouth is swimming toward you, he is more curious than aggressive. He also stated that snakes can only strike within 2/3rds of their body, so a three-foot snake could reach up to two feet.

A person bitten by a snake should look at the characteristics to determine the type of snake that it is. Venomous snakes will leave two distinct puncture wounds and the non-venomous may leave marks that resemble scratch marks.

If you are bitten by a venomous snake, you should get to as hospital or clinic as quickly as possible. If you can't get to a hospital quickly, wrap a constricting band between the bite area and the heart to slow it down, but to not stop the blood flow completely. Avoid using a tourniquet. Also, it is better to by-pass first aid and go immediately to the hospital. With dogs, cats or other pets, it is better to go straight to a veterinary clinic for treatment.

Be extra careful if you encounter small snakes. They usually are harder to identify and will inject more venom than adults.

PRECAUTIONS TO TAKE IF A SNAKE BITES YOU:

- ***If the snake is still in the area, don't attempt to kill it or catch it, unless it poses a danger to your or the bitten victim. Try to remember what it looks like so that you can help to identify it from pictures in the emergency room.***
- ***Remove all items that might restrict circulation in the affected extremity. Jewelry, gloves or shoes may pose a problem as the bite begins to swell.***
- ***Immobilize the area as much as possible. Attempt to keep the bite at slightly below the level of the head.***
- ***If swelling occurs rapidly, place a one-inch wide constricting band about two inches above the bite. This is not a tourniquet (as discussed earlier) and should not fit so tightly that you can't get easily slip a finger under it.***
- ***Attempt to keep the person from moving about rapidly while transporting to the nearest medical facility.***

DON'T:

- ~give the victim any food or drink, especially alcohol.
- ~place the bite in ice.
- ~make any cuts or attempt to suck the venom.
- ~attempt to administer, give anti-venom, pain or non-anxiety medications.

You can get help by contacting the **Poison Control Center** at **(601) 354-7660**. Also keep the number of the local medical authorities accessible.