



Snakes of Georgia

Linda May, Environmental Outreach Coordinator
GA Dept. of Natural Resources – Wildlife Resources Division
Nongame Conservation Section



Eastern Kingsnake Linda May

According to the National Wildlife Federation, at least 20% of the U.S. population suffers some degree of snake fear. Regardless of the cause, extreme fear is unnecessary. Snakes are not under every rock or behind every tree; encounters are relatively infrequent. Typically, the more people learn about snakes, the less they fear them. By learning about species identification and distribution as well as the fascinating natural history of these reptiles, you will greatly reduce your fear of Georgia's snakes and enjoy the outdoors more.

Probability of Snakebite:

Venomous snakes of Georgia pose little threat to humans who leave them alone.

Out of 10,000 snakebites in the U.S. per year, only 12-15 result in death. Therefore, your chance of survival is 499 out of 500.

- Lightning kills many more people every year than snakes do.
- The probability of dying in a car accident far exceeds the chance of dying from a venomous snake bite.
- Several thousand people are bitten by venomous snakes each year in the United States, but fewer than 10 of these bites actually results in death.
- As many as half of all bites by venomous snakes are mild or “dry” bites in which little or no venom is injected.

In Case of a Snakebite:

Before snakebite treatment is necessary, the snake must be venomous. Using a field guide, familiarize yourself with the 6 species of venomous snakes that live in Georgia. If the snake is non-venomous, simply wash the affected area with soap and water. If the snake is venomous, follow these “Do’s” and notice these “Don’ts”:

Field herpetologists consider car keys & a car to be the best snakebite kit.

- **DO** stay calm! Keep the bitten area below heart level, and remove rings, watches, and tight clothing. Try to identify the offending snake if you can do so easily, without putting yourself at risk or wasting valuable time. **DO get to the nearest hospital or emergency medical facility immediately, even if you suspect a dry bite.** The universal treatment for a serious snakebite is the use of antivenin or snakebite serum, which should only be administered by a medical doctor. *If local doctors aren't sure which antivenin to use, advise them to contact the American Association of Poison Control Centers (1-800-222-1222).*
- **DON'T** eat or drink anything, including alcoholic beverages or medicines. **DON'T** run or engage in strenuous activity. **DON'T** cut into or incise bite marks with a blade. **DON'T** apply a tourniquet after a pit viper bite (although it may be helpful after an elapid bite). **DON'T** use a stun gun or other electrical shock. **DON'T** freeze or apply extreme cold to the area of the bite.

Georgia Laws Regarding Snakes:

Many people feel “the only good snake is a dead snake” and go out of their way to kill them. Harmless water snakes often are mistaken for cottonmouths and are killed “just in case.” However, killing non-venomous snakes is illegal in Georgia. Keeping native non-venomous snakes as pets also is illegal without the proper permits (call the DNR Special Permits Office at 770-761-3044 for info on obtaining exhibition permits for educational purposes). Venomous snakes, although beneficial, are not protected since they may pose a threat to humans. Be sure you know which 6 of the 41 species of snakes in Georgia are venomous. If possible, simply leave venomous snakes alone; you don't need to kill them just because it's legal.

Online Resources

Georgia DNR Snake Fact Sheets: www.georgiawildlife.com/GeorgiaSnakes
“How Dangerous Are Venomous Snakes in America?": <http://srelherp.uga.edu/projects/snakebit.htm>
UGA “Snakes of Georgia & South Carolina”: www.uga.edu/srelherp/snakes/index.htm

Venomous Snakes of Georgia

PIT VIPERS (Family Viperidae):

“Pit vipers” have a heat-sensing “pit” between their eye and nostril. Their fangs fold up against the roof of their mouth. These snakes are generally stockier in appearance than long, skinny non-venomous snakes and typically have triangular-shaped heads (although some non-venomous water snakes do too), vertical pupils, and a single row of belly scales under their vent.



- **COPPERHEAD:** Found in hardwood forests, both wet and dry. Adults reach 2-3 feet in length and are light brown to pinkish in color with darker, saddle-shaped crossbands. Markings are shaped like Hershey’s kisses from the side. Young copperheads have a bright yellow tail tip that is used to lure small prey.



- **COTTONMOUTH:** Found in every type of wetland habitat but travels across land in search of food. Adults reach 3-4 feet in length and vary in color. Their backs may be drab brown or olive with darker crossbands. The belly is dull yellow and brown, and the underside of the tail is usually black. Unlike other water snakes, the cottonmouth has a black band from its eyes extending towards its neck and often stands its ground with an open-mouthed threat display. Like the copperhead, young cottonmouths have bright yellow tail tips.



- **TIMBER RATTLESNAKE (CANEBRAKE):** Found in a variety of terrestrial habitats as well as swamps. Adults may reach up to 5 feet in length. Their basic color is gray with black V-shaped crossbands. Some may have an orange-brown stripe down the middle of their back. The tail is black with rattles at the tip. This species is passive if not pestered, rarely attacking if you back away and leave it alone.



- **EASTERN DIAMONDBACK RATTLESNAKE**



Found mostly in dry terrestrial habitats but also wet areas. Adults may reach up to 6+ feet in length. Their basic color is light to dark brown with distinct diamonds of brown and yellow. The tail is banded and has rattles. Because of this snake’s huge size and potent venom, it is considered by some to be the most dangerous snake in the United States.



PIGMY RATTLESNAKE: Found in wooded areas and swamps. Adults are heavy-bodied but rarely more than 1 foot long. They are dull gray with dark gray or brown blotches on the back and sides. This species is so small that people rarely see them coiled in pine straw or dead leaves.



ELAPIDS (Family Elapidae):

This snake family includes cobras, kraits, and coral snakes – all of which have fixed fangs. Only one elapid species lives in Georgia, and it has short, fixed fangs in the front of its mouth.



- **EASTERN CORAL SNAKE:** Found in a wide variety of habitats including wooded areas, fields, and pond margins. Adults reach about 2 feet in length. With red, yellow, and black rings encircling the body, this species may be confused with the non-venomous Scarlet Kingsnake, which has similar band colors. However, the two species may be distinguished by the order of their colored bands: “Red touch yellow harms a fellow” = the venomous Coral Snake. “Red touch black, venom lack/friend of Jack” = the non-venomous Scarlet Kingsnake. Coral snake bites can be quite serious, so don’t pick up this snake just because it’s pretty!

