



VENOMOUS SNAKES FACT SHEET SERIES

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Cottonmouth

Agkistrodon piscivorous

The subject of many a southern story, cottonmouths, also known as water moccasins, aren't quite the creature they are made out to be. Rather than aggression, they exhibit a measured intelligence and level of curiosity.

Description

Cottonmouths are a pit viper. Like the copperheads and the rattlesnakes, they have a small heat-sensitive pit located between their nostril and their eye. This determines the warmth of an area and helps with accurate striking at prey. Cottonmouths are large in general- even the babies are stocky, with big blocky heads. Adults are commonly up to four feet long, and very thick. The largest individual was just under six feet long. The head is large, and very distinct from the neck. There is a bold stripe that obscures the eye and goes to the back corner of the mouth. The body is covered in keeled scales and is banded in brownish, olive or even dark gold colors. Snakes in some populations lose their pattern and darken in color overall as they grow. The juveniles look like miniature adults but are usually a lighter and somewhat brighter color. Young snakes have a bright yellow-green tail tip. This is used as a caudal lure to entice prey closer.



Photo by Berkeley Boone

Range & Habitat

The cottonmouth is confined mostly to the Coastal Plain region in Georgia, but does make it up the western side of the state. It is absent from the northeastern quarter of the state. In the United States, these snakes can be found from the southeastern corner of Virginia across the coastal plain to central Texas, Oklahoma and Missouri. Cottonmouths are found mostly in swampy habitats but may also be found along the edges of slow-moving rivers, vegetated lakes, farm ponds and creeks.

Myth & Legend

Stories abound of the aggressive nature of cottonmouths: folks who were chased through the woods, floating nests of cottonmouths that bit a water skier in (insert name here) Lake, a snake dropping into a canoe or swimming over to attack paddlers, and so on. Cottonmouths are not aggressive; they are aware of their surroundings and curious. Cottonmouths tend to avoid open water, much preferring slow-moving water that has lots of fallen logs and overgrown cover. They will also hold their ground if surprised, but open their mouths and show the white lining inside, and will certainly try to escape if given the chance. Sometimes that quickest escape route may be behind the person telling the story, which gives the impression that the snake was attacking. Nearly any snake that drops out of low hanging tree limbs into the water or boats is a water snake—

that is their preferred method of defense. Cottonmouths can and will climb trees, but don't do so regularly, and they don't drop off of the branches quickly if they can avoid it.

Similar Looking Species

There are several species of water snakes that are often confused with cottonmouths.

One lookalike is the brown water snake (*Nerodia taxispilota*), a large, two-toned brown snake that also is seen on the edges of waterways. Brown water snakes have comparatively slender bodies for their size, and their head is not as blocky looking. They also have clean, square blotches that run down the middle of their backs, as opposed to the jagged, triangular bands on the cottonmouth's sides. Another species that is often confused with the cottonmouth is the banded water snake (*N. fasciata*). Its jagged edged pattern is wider at the top than at the bottom though, and it has dark stripes on its lips, whereas the cottonmouth does not have patterning on the lips.



This brown water snake has a much more slender body, and it has square blotches on the back. Photo by Berkeley Boone

Natural History



Cottonmouths are very comfortable in the water, and often swim with an elevated head. Photo by Berkeley Boone

Cottonmouths do not have a well-defined activity period, and can be found moving nearly any time. During the summer they may shift toward being more nocturnal. Eight to ten babies in a litter are born in late summer. Captives are known to live over fifteen years, and wild individuals likely have similar life spans.

Cottonmouths are poikilothermic, meaning that they rely on ambient temperatures and basking to regulate the temperature of their body, and are unable to maintain it on their own. They are surprisingly tolerant of cool weather and are often seen basking on sunny days in the winter. They will utilize stump holes, root masses from overturned trees and piles of downed limbs for shelter.

Cottonmouths are both ambush predators and will actively seek prey. They are not picky eaters either, and are known to eat fish, frogs, other snakes, rodents, birds, even carrion that is discovered. Opossums, raccoons, birds of prey, and kingsnakes will all eat young snakes, but alligators and feral hogs are probably the only real predators of adults.

Conservation

Cottonmouths are generally common where they are found and populations seem to be stable. Being killed by humans or being run over by cars are their biggest threats.



A banded water snake's head is similarly sized to the neck, and a pattern that is wider at top. Photo by Berkeley Boone