Venomous Snakes of the Southeastern U.S.

Venomous Snake Identification

As a resident of the southeastern United States, it is important that you learn to identify those regional species that may pose a threat to humans. Then, by process of elimination, all others can be recognized as harmless (nonvenomous). Knowing the following characteristics is helpful.

Coral Snake - Red and yellow rings touch (every other ring yellow). Similar non-venomous species have red and black rings or blotches touching (every other ring black).

Eastern Diamond-backed Rattlesnake - Pupils elliptical, sensory pit present between nostril and eye, most scales on underside of tail single like belly scales, not divided. DON'T RELY ON TRIANGULAR HEAD.

Pygmy Rattlesnake - Sistrurus miliarius

Crotalus adamanteus

Cottonmouth - Agkistrodon piscivorus

To Avoid Being Bitten

1. Don't put your hands or feet in places you cannot see or have not examined. Do not turn over rocks, logs, or trash with your hands.
2. Don't crawl under fences, buildings, or other objects without carefully looking under them.
3. In the wild, don't sit, stand or walk without looking.
4. Don't wear low-cut shoes or swim in areas known to be infested with venomous snakes.
5. Don't gather firewood after dark or without looking carefully.
6. Don't sleep on the ground near woodpiles, cave entrances, or swampy areas.
7. Don't be careless when moving boats left on shore for several hours.
8. Don't disturb snakes, or unnecessarily try to kill them.
9. Don't handle 'dead' snakes with your hands.
10. Don't attempt to capture snakes unless you are skilled.
11. Don't get within a snake's striking distance while trying to identify it.
12. Don't travel alone in snake-infested areas.
13. Don't stay near a snake if it bites you.
14. Don't forget that venomous snakes can climb trees, can bite underwater, do occur in high altitudes, and may enter saltwater.

Emergency Treatment

1. Calm and reassure the victim; don't panic.
2. Remove all rings, bracelets, or other constricting items.
3. Immobilize the bitten area as much as circumstances allow. Keep the bitten area at or below heart level.
4. Take victim to medical facility as quickly as possible. CALL AHEAD TO ALERT EMERGENCY ROOM YOU ARE ON YOUR WAY. This is a medical emergency, and they need to prepare.

NOTE:

- Do not give victim any drink or food by mouth.
- Do not use a constricting band or tourniquet in the absence of an obviously severe envenomation.
- Do not place ice on bitten extremity, and don't use electric shock.
- Do not make any cuts. Instead, use THE EXTRACTOR®, manufactured by Sawyer, and recommended by some physicians skilled in venomous snakebite treatment. This instrument may remove venom by suction without the use of incisions.
- Only a physician should administer antivenom.
- If feasible, bring dead snake for positive identification (use caution - don't handle 'dead' snakes with your hands).

Snakebite Statistics

Most snakebites are by non-venomous species. Of all the bites by venomous snakes, 25-50% do not inject any venom. MORE IMPORTANT, MORTALITY IS LESS THAN 1% FOR PHYSICIAN TREATED VENOMOUS SNAKEBITES IN THE UNITED STATES.

Identification Aid

Snakes pictured are generally typical; however, some variation in color and markings does occur. If in doubt, consult an identification expert.

- Herpetologist, Loyola University (504) 865-2107
- Reptile Curator, Audubon Zoo (New Orleans) (504) 212-5240
- Museum of Natural Science, LSU (Baton Rouge) (225) 576-2555
- Museum of Natural History, LSU (Shreveport) (318) 797-6358
- Acadiana Park Nature Station (Lafayette) (337) 291-8448
- Walter B. Jacobs Nature Park (Shreveport) (318) 929-2806
- Louisiana Purchase Gardens & Zoo (Monroe) (318) 329-2400
- Bluebonnet Swamp Nature Center (Baton Rouge) (225) 757-8905

Venomous Snakebite Management Consultation

Check with your local emergency rooms to ensure that they have medical experience with venomous snakebites.

- Ochsner Hospital Emergency Room (New Orleans) (504) 842-3460
- West Jefferson Medical Center (Marrero) (504) 349-1533
- Ochsner Hospital Emergency Room (Baton Rouge) (225) 358-1000
- East Jefferson General Hospital (Metairie) (504) 454-4000
- Slidell Memorial Hospital (Slidell) (985) 649-8542
- St. Tammany Parish Hospital (Covington) (985) 898-4000

Information About Available Antivenoms

(excluding exotic species)

- Arizona Poison Center (Clearinghouse) (520) 626-6016
- Alabama Regional Poison Control Center (205) 939-9201
- Florida Poison Information Center (813) 253-4444
- Georgia Poison Center (404) 616-9000
- Louisiana Poison Control Center (318) 342-3648
- Texas State Poison Center (214) 589-0911

Authors: Robert A. Thomas, Ph.D. and James A. Davis
Published by Loyola Center for Environmental Communication, Special thanks to David L. Hardy, B.S., MD, and J. Kevin Bowler
Drawings by Edmund D. Keiser, Ph.D.
Photographs by Robert A. Thomas, Ph.D. and James W. Beck
Photography by David L. Hardy, B.S., MD
Graphic design by Paige Heinrichs
July 7, 2011 2nd edition

Pygmy Rattlesnake - Sistrurus miliarius

Cottonmouth - Agkistrodon piscivorus

Eastern Diamond-backed Rattlesnake - Crotalus adamanteus

Copperhead - Agkistrodon contortrix

Timber (Canebrake) Rattlesnake - Crotalus horridus

Coralsnake - Texas Coralsnake, Micrurus tener, above, west of the Mississippi River

Harlequin Coralsnake, Micrurus fulvius, east of the Mississippi River