

Louisiana Milk Snake

Lampropeltis triangulum amaura



PHOTO BY TERRY HIBBITTS



The Louisiana milk snake is one of four coral snake-pretenders in Texas. Although non-venomous, Louisiana milk snakes look like highly venomous coral snakes—they both have bands of black, red, and yellow.

Northern Pineywoods

Louisiana Milk Snake

Lampropeltis triangulum amaura



APPEARANCE

Length: 16 to 24 inches (40 to 69 cm)

Distinguishing Characteristics

- Alternating bands, in order, of black-red-black-yellow-black. The red bands are solidly colored and are wider than the yellow or black bands.
- Black head is slightly pointed.
- Scales are shiny.

LIFE HISTORY

Range: Southwest Arkansas to southeast Oklahoma and south through Louisiana and Texas

Diet: Small snakes, small lizards and newborn mice

Predators: Other snakes, bullfrogs, hawks and owls, skunks, raccoons and other mammals

Sexual maturity: At two to three years

Mating season: Spring

Eggs: Two to 16, with an average clutch of nine

Nests: From early June through mid-July, the female lays her eggs inside a rotting log, beneath piles of plant material or in sandy, well-drained soil.

Incubation: 62 days

Young: 5.5 to 8 inches (14 to 20 cm) and are patterned and colored like their parents

Life span: One specimen lived for 20 years and 7 months in captivity; the life span is shorter in the wild.

HABITAT

Louisiana milk snakes prefer moist, sandy, low-lying wooded areas or beneath driftwood and other cover on the Gulf Coast barrier islands.

BEHAVIOR

Milk snakes are secretive burrowers, hiding by day in loose, sandy soil, beneath objects on the ground or under the bark of tree trunks or logs. They are *nocturnal*, or move above ground at night. The snakes' coloring camouflages them particularly well at night. Because they are cool-weather reptiles, they suffer less from chilly temperatures. Unlike other snakes that become lethargic at night and during the cool days of spring and fall, Louisiana milk snakes move quickly and easily in cool temperatures.

NOW YOU KNOW!

- It is important to know the difference between Louisiana milk snakes and coral snakes. Coral snakes have red bands bordered by yellow; milk snakes have red bands bordered by black. It might be easier to remember this rhyme: **Red to yellow, kill a fellow; Red to black, friend of Jack.**
- It was once believed that milk snakes mimicked, or looked like, coral snakes to avoid predators. But most snake-eating mammals are colorblind and many predatory birds can probably see color. The best explanation is that the body rings serve to break up or disguise the body shape of the snake.

LOUISIANA MILK SNAKES AND PEOPLE

In the old days, farmers often believed that milk snakes were responsible for cows drying up. They thought that these snakes would sneak into the barns under the cover of darkness and suckle the cows dry. The discovery of a snake in the barn the following day led to the farmer's "logical" conclusion: the snake was the guilty party. But, of course, snakes don't drink cow's milk. They eat small reptiles and mammals. Besides, snakes have teeth. Just imagine the cow's reaction to a snake biting her udder! The commotion would surely have alerted the farmer to the problem.

In reality, Louisiana milk snakes are members of the king snake family, and as such, they seldom bite, although they may nip. Generally speaking, you should never disturb snakes in the wild, especially if you are unsure whether the snake in front of you is a coral snake or a Louisiana milk snake.