

Southern Copperhead

Agkistrodon contortrix contortrix



Lying motionless on a bed of dead leaves, the pale-brown and chestnut-colored southern copperhead is all but invisible—a regular *stealth* viper! These are venomous snakes, but they are slow-movers, and depending on the season, they often share habitats with their prey.

Northern Pineywoods

Southern Copperhead

Agkistrodon contortrix contortrix



APPEARANCE

Length: 24 to 26 inches (60 to 66 cm)

Distinguishing Characteristics

- Pale brown to light tan body, often with a pinkish tint
- Yellow eyes with elliptical or cat-like pupils
- Dark, hour glass-shaped cross bands, wider at their base and narrow across the back
- Heat-sensing "pits" located between the eyes and nostrils, hence the name "pit viper"
- Rough scales

LIFE HISTORY

Range: Eastern United States to central and southern states, and in the eastern third of Texas

Diet: Baby cottontails, swamp rabbits, rats, mice, birds, snakes, lizards, baby turtles, frogs, toads and insects, especially grasshoppers and cicadas

Predators: Other snakes and *raptors* (birds of prey)

Sexual maturity: Males within two years, females in three

Mating season: Spring (February to early May), shortly after leaving winter dens; and fall (August to October) with fertilization delayed until following spring

Eggs: Copperheads, like other pit vipers, do not lay eggs. Instead the eggs are kept inside the female's body until the eggs are ready to "hatch."

Incubation: 105 to 110 days

Young: The four to eight young, 7 to 10 inches (17 to 25 cm) long, weigh less than an ounce (28 g) at birth. Although duller in color, they look much like adults with yellowish tail-tips. (Tail-tips fade after third or fourth year.) Females provide no parental care after birth.

Life span: One animal lived 23 years and 2 months in captivity, but in the wild, the average is probably 6 to 8 years.

HABITAT

Southern copperheads prefer mixed pasture and wooded lowlands, usually within a river bottom, where leaf litter, logs and branches provide places to hide. They are sometimes present in wooded suburbs, adapting to the presence of humans.

BEHAVIOR

Southern copperheads are *diurnal* (active during daylight hours) during early spring and late fall, at which time they will generally depend on the ability of their bodies to blend in with their environment to obtain prey and avoid enemies. They are nocturnal during the summer heat, actively hunting for prey during the cooler evening hours. Southern copperheads often eat one single meal every three weeks—even during their most active months. Copperheads sometimes nest with other snake species during hibernation.

NOW YOU KNOW!

- Some people believe that the bite of a baby venomous snake is more powerful than that of an adult. Actually, there is no difference in the venom's potency, regardless of the age of the snake. Snake venom's most important function is to kill animals to be eaten. Defense is only a secondary function.
- Like all vipers, they use the "heat seeking pits" behind their eyes to help locate their prey.

SOUTHERN COPPERHEADS AND PEOPLE

The bite of a copperhead is seldom fatal because of its short fangs (1.2 to 7.2 mm in length) and small amount of venom. Taking some simple safety precautions, however, can keep you from harm. Be careful where you put your hands and feet—don't reach or step until you can see the bottom. Never step over a log without first seeing what is on the other side. If you must move a log, use a long stick or garden tool first to ensure snakes are neither under, on or around these favored habitats. Use a flashlight when moving about at night, even in your home yard. Animal burrows make excellent habitat for snakes—don't reach in without first checking. Wear protective clothing if working in areas where you suspect snakes nearby. Heavy footwear, snake proof trousers and/or leggings will help reduce your risk. Freeze when snakes are known to be nearby until you know where they are. Allow the snake to retreat. If you must move, back slowly and carefully away from the snake.