



Copperhead

North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



Photo by Jodie Owen

Copperhead

(*Agkistrodon contortrix*)

The copperhead is familiar, at least by name, to most North Carolinians. Deriving its common name from its coppery brown head, the copperhead also is known by such local names as “pilot,” “chunkhead,” “poplar leaf” and “highland moccasin.” But most people are not as knowledgeable about the copperhead as they believe themselves to be—if they were, they would treat these interesting animals with more respect. Few creatures are more widely (and unjustly) feared and persecuted. Not only are huge numbers of copperheads deliberately killed simply because they are venomous, but many nonvenomous snakes are mistaken for copperheads and killed. Those who truly know the copperhead can do no less than appreciate it.

Description

The copperhead has a light brown, coppery or tan (sometimes grayish or pinkish tan) ground color, with strongly contrasting chestnut brown crossbands shaped like an hourglass or dumbbell—narrow in the center of the back and wide along the sides. Individual patterns vary—sometimes the bands may break up along the center, and some specimens have small dark spots between the bands—but nearly all individuals have at least some complete, hourglass-shaped crossbands.

The head is somewhat triangular, quite distinct from the neck, and tan or copper in color, with a thin, dark line running from the eye to the rear of the jaw. The pupils are vertical and elliptical, and there is a heat sensory pit between the eye and nostril. The top of the head does not have a pattern but often has two small dots of dark pigment. The belly is usually whitish or yellowish white, sometimes mottled or stippled with brown or gray, with a series of dark brown or black spots or smudges along the sides. The dorsal scales are keeled, and the scales beneath the tail are usually undivided, except at the tip. The body is relatively stout and slightly triangular in cross section. Hinged, recurved, hollow fangs are present in the front of the upper jaw. Learn more by visiting ncwildlife.org/copperhead.

History and Status

The copperhead is the most common and widespread venomous snake in North Carolina. In many areas, including most of the larger urban regions, it is the only venomous snake. Many populations have been reduced, and some eliminated, by habitat destruction and individual persecution, but the adaptable copperhead remains common in many areas. It is not listed under any category of special protection.



Copperhead Pattern

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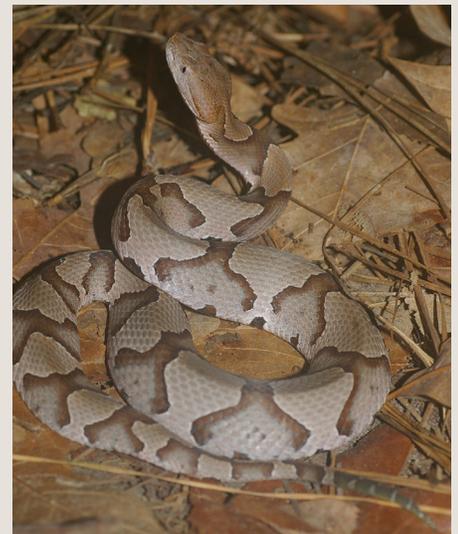


Photo by Jeff Hall



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Range and Distribution

Copperheads are found statewide.

Range Map



■ Copperhead Range

Copperhead

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Habitats & Habits

Copperheads are found in a wide variety of habitats, but they are most often associated with woodlands. Favorite spots are those providing cover as well as some sun for basking, such as woodland edges, rocky south-facing slopes and ivy thickets. Old sawdust piles, slab piles, trash dumps and dilapidated buildings are good places to find copperheads. They are frequently encountered on roads at night, and large numbers are killed by motor vehicles.

Copperheads may be active by day or night, but they are largely nocturnal in hot weather. They may hunt actively for food, but primarily are very efficient “sit-and-wait” predators, feeding on virtually any animal of suitable size that ventures near. Prey items are quickly bitten and usually succumb to the hemotoxic venom within a few minutes. If a bitten animal runs a short distance before it dies, the snake has only to follow a scent trail to its fallen prey. Like all other snakes, copperheads swallow their prey whole. The venom may aid in digestion by breaking down the victim’s tissues.

Copperhead predators include eastern kingsnakes, black racers and various carnivorous mammals and birds, which copperheads elude largely by hiding beneath sheltering objects or relying on their superb camouflage. If these tactics fail and a copperhead is discovered, it usually attempts to crawl quickly away. Individual temperament varies, but most specimens do not hesitate to bite in self-defense if restrained, cornered or otherwise provoked. Like most other snakes, they also release a potent musk from glands beneath the base of the tail, which may repel certain predators.

In winter, copperheads hibernate in stump holes, rock fissures or other sheltered areas below the frost line. Such sites may be shared with other snakes of the same or different species. Copperheads often emerge later in the spring than do some other snakes.

Human Interactions

Copperheads account for probably over 90 percent of venomous snakebites in North Carolina. A bite is painful and should be treated as serious, but it is not considered life threatening. Many bites occur when a hand or foot is carelessly placed on or very close to one of these wonderfully camouflaged snakes, but a large percentage occur while persons are attempting to capture, kill or handle copperheads. The great majority of bites can be prevented by exercising common sense: copperheads should be left alone.

References

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- Palmer, William M. *Poisonous Snakes of North Carolina* (Raleigh: N.C. State Museum of Natural History, 1974).
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Credits

Written by Jeff Beane; updated by Deborah Robertson, Wake County Parks, Recreation & Open Space and Jeff Hall, NCRWC. (2018). Produced by the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission. ncwildlife.org

Wild Facts

Classification

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Average Size

24 to 36 in. The record is 53 in. Largest preserved North Carolina specimen is 46 in.

Food

Mostly rodents, shrews, lizards, snakes, frogs, salamanders and certain insects, such as large caterpillars and cicada nymphs.

Breeding

Copperheads are normally sexually mature at about 3 years of age. Breeding has been recorded both in the spring and in the late summer to early fall. A pair engaged in courtship may remain together for several days beneath a sheltering object. A female retains her eggs inside her body and gives birth to from 2 to 18 living young, usually in August, September or early October. Females have only one litter per year, and in many populations they may breed only every other year.

Young

Give birth to live young that are 8 to 10 in. long. Young resemble adults except for a bright sulfur yellow tail tip.

Life Expectancy

Several captives have lived well over 20 years, and one lived to be over 30. Very few survive for nearly that long in the wild.



Juvenile copperhead with yellow-tipped tail.
(Photo by Jodie Owen)