

Snakes on the Plain

By Brooke Cain

The sight of a snake — any snake — is enough to send most of us into a panic. But even though there are 37 species of snakes in North Carolina, the majority of them are nonvenomous and not aggressive unless threatened.

There are six venomous snakes found in North Carolina. Know what they look like. It's good to know the venomous (sometimes called poisonous) snakes from the harmless ones, which are usually beneficial to keep around. A good rule of thumb is that most venomous snakes have a triangular or diamond-shaped head, while nonvenomous snakes have a tapered head.

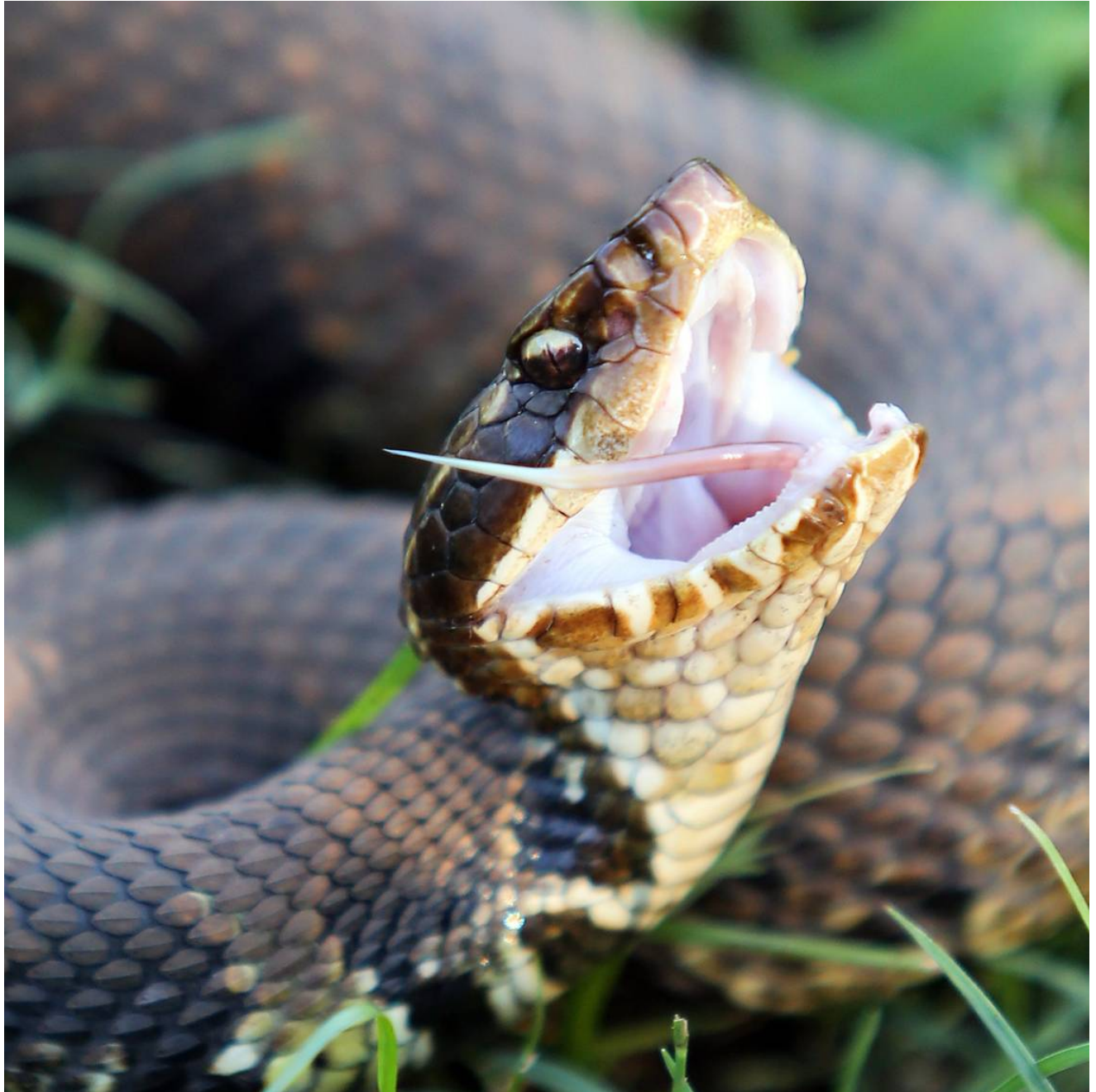
Following are the five venomous snakes that cause the most snake bite poisonings in North Carolina. The sixth snake on our list is extremely rare, but has a very serious bite. Scroll to the bottom for tips on how to handle snake bites..

Copperhead



Copperhead snakes, the most common venomous snakes in North Carolina, are brownish in color with an hourglass shaped pattern. The Carolinas Poison Center in Charlotte says it receives about 10 times the number of calls about copperhead bites than all other snakes combined. Copperhead bites can be severe, but about half of copperhead bites result in only mild swelling and pain. Adult copperheads grow to about 3 feet long and they are found all over North Carolina

Cottonmouth (water moccasin)



Cottonmouth snakes have dark bands on dark or olive skin, but are most well known for the white, cotton-like interior of their mouths. Young cottonmouths can be lighter in color and resemble copperheads. Juveniles have bright yellow or greenish tail tips, and the details of the crossband pattern are most evident in this age group. Older individuals are often completely dark and unpatterned. They are found mostly in the eastern part of North Carolina, and prefer freshwater environments (but can also be found on land). The bite severity of a cottonmouth is similar to that of a copperhead. Adult cottonmouths grow to about 3-4 feet in length but have been known to grow to 6 feet.

Eastern diamondback rattlesnake



The eastern diamondback rattlesnake has gray or yellowish skin with a dark diamond pattern outlined in black. They have large, broad heads with two light lines on the face. These snakes are known for the bone-chilling rattle sound they make. It is the heaviest, though not the longest venomous snake in the Americas, and it is the largest rattlesnake. Bites from rattlesnakes are more severe than copperheads or cottonmouths, and are considered a medical emergency. The eastern diamondback rattler typically grows to about 4-5 feet in length (the largest ever recorded was 8 feet long) and they are found in the southeastern parts of North Carolina, preferring sandy, coastal regions.

Pigmy rattlesnake



Pigmy rattlesnakes have gray, pinkish or red skin with a dark, spotted pattern. They do rattle, but the rattle sounds more like a buzz. They grow only to about 1-2 feet in length, and they are found in the southeastern part of North Carolina, particularly in forests. Bites from rattlesnakes are more severe than copperheads or cottonmouths, and are considered a medical emergency.

Timber rattlesnake



The timber rattlesnake can vary in color, but has dark bands on lighter skin with a rattle at the end of its tail. Coastal varieties have what looks like a brown or orange "racing stripe" down the middle of the back. These snakes, which grow to about 4 feet in length, can be found throughout the state, preferring forests. Bites from rattlesnakes are more severe than copperheads or cottonmouths, and are considered a medical emergency.

Eastern coral snake

Coral snakes are actually extremely rare and are considered endangered, but they are venomous. They are slender with red, yellow and black rings. The coral snake resembles the scarlet kingsnake (which is harmless), but there's an easy way to tell them apart. Just remember this: "Red on black, friend of Jack; red on yellow, kill a fellow." Also, scarlet kingsnakes have red snouts, and coral snakes have black snouts (their snouts are blunt, compared to most snakes). Coral snakes live in sandy areas and stay underground most of the time. Coral snake venom attacks the central nervous system, and death, if it occurs, is usually the result of respiratory failure.



If you have been bitten by a snake, you SHOULD:

- Sit down and stay calm.
- Gently wash the area with warm, soapy water.
- Remove any jewelry or tight clothing near the bite site.
- Keep the bitten area still, if possible, and raise it to heart level.
- Call the Carolinas Poison Center: 1-800-222-1222.

Note: If a snakebite victim is having chest pain, difficulty breathing, face swelling or has lost consciousness, call 911 immediately.

If bitten by a snake, you SHOULD NOT:

- Cut the bitten area to try to drain the venom. This can worsen the injury.
- Ice the area. Icing causes additional tissue damage.
- Make and apply a tourniquet or any tight bandage. It's better for the venom to flow through the body than for it to stay in one area.
- Suck or use a suction device to remove the venom.
- Attempt to catch or kill the snake.

Call Carolinas Poison Center at 1-800-222-1222 for questions about a snake bite or for more information.