

Identification of Snakes in Alabama for Forest Workers

As a forest worker in the Southeast, you are likely to encounter a variety of wildlife while on the job. In Alabama, you may encounter deer, wild turkeys, rabbits, squirrels, and coyotes. Another species of wildlife that you may encounter in the forest is snakes. The ability to identify snakes while in the forest – venomous, nonvenomous, and endangered snakes – is important for a number of reasons, but primarily to keep you safe on the job.

Snakes are helpful to humans and are a part of our natural environment. It is important that you learn to distinguish venomous and nonvenomous snakes. Approximately forty species of snakes live in Alabama, but only six of these are venomous. There are several general rules that are useful in field identification.

The sixth type of venomous snake in Alabama is the coral snake. This fairly small, secretive relative of the cobra has a black snout and black and red rings separated by yellow rings. Unlike the pit viper, the coral snake has a small head, round pupils, and a slender body.

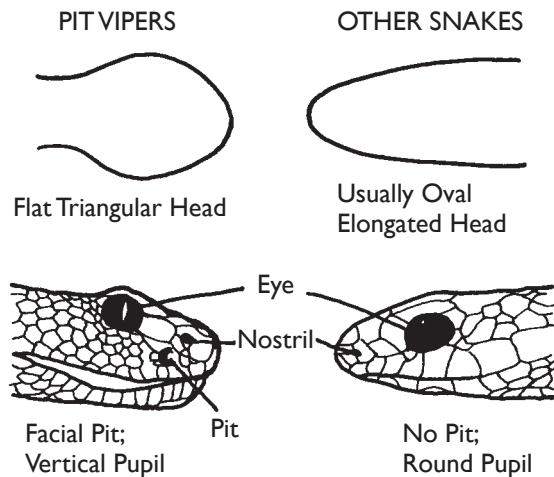
The following are brief descriptions that identify the characteristics and habitat of Alabama's venomous snakes.

Eastern diamondback rattlesnake

An extremely large, heavy-bodied snake, capable of attaining a length of about 8 feet. The diamondback likes the relatively dry pine flatwoods and longleaf pine turkey oak hills of southern Alabama. Diamondbacks feed on mice, rats, and rabbits, and less frequently on squirrels and birds.

Timber rattlesnake

A large, heavy-bodied snake that may attain a length of more than 7 feet. The species may be found in most of Alabama. It is most common in sparsely settled, forested areas. The timber rattlesnake feeds on a variety of small rodents and, infrequently, on ground-dwelling birds.



Snake head comparisons

Venomous Snakes

Five of the six venomous snake species in Alabama are in the pit viper group. Pit vipers get their name from the presence of pits on both sides of the face between the eye and nostril. Pit vipers have vertical or “cat-like” pupils, thin necks, and heavy bodies. While all pit vipers have wide, triangular heads, some nonvenomous snakes share this characteristic. Pit vipers are also characterized by having retractable, hollow fangs near the front of the mouth. This group includes the eastern diamondback rattlesnake, timber rattlesnake, pygmy rattlesnake, copperhead, and cottonmouth.



Timber rattlesnake



Pygmy rattlesnake

Pygmy rattlesnake

A small snake, with a maximum length of 30 inches. Distributed throughout the state, it is seldom encountered except during late summer. The small rattle can scarcely be heard farther than 3 feet away. The pygmy rattlesnake feeds on mice, lizards, frogs, insects, and spiders.

Copperhead

A medium-sized snake, with a maximum length of slightly more than 4 feet. It is distributed throughout the state, but is scarce in parts of extreme southern Alabama. Color patterns are highly variable, but the basic color is tan to brown with darker crossbands. Above the coastal plain, the copperhead prefers forested areas with rocky bluffs and ravines. In the coastal plain, it prefers floodplains, swamp edges, and hilly hardwood areas. Abandoned farms also provide ideal habitat conditions. The copperhead's diet consists of small mammals, frogs, lizards, and insects.



Copperhead



Cottonmouth

Cottonmouth

A large, heavy-bodied, aquatic snake. In Alabama, the cottonmouth may attain a maximum length of about 5 feet. Adults are variable in color, ranging from a solid dark gray to blackish-tan with brown bands. Young cottonmouths are tan with conspicuous bands. The cottonmouth lives in waters statewide. Its diet includes insects, snails, fish, frogs, baby alligators, lizards, turtles, snakes, bird eggs, small mammals, and carrion. There are seven species of harmless water snakes often mistaken for cottonmouths.



Coral snake

Coral

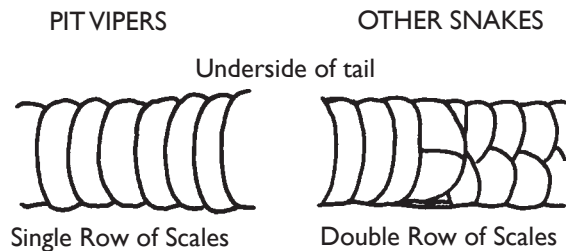
A slender snake with a maximum size of about 3 feet. The top of the head and nose are black. The typical body markings are complete bands of alternating red and black, separated by narrow yellow rings. The snake is found mostly in the lower coastal plain. Coral snakes spend much of their time underground in loose soils. They will bite readily when restrained and they have a habit of “balling

the tail” and waving it around. This habit may cause the handler to mistake the tail for the head. The coral snake’s venom is conducted through a pair of short, erect, grooved fangs near the front of the upper jaw. The best practice is to leave coral snakes alone and under no circumstances handle them – the bite can be deadly.

Nonvenomous Snakes

The nonvenomous snakes of Alabama are too numerous to mention separately; however, it is important to note that three nonvenomous snakes, the scarlet snake, the scarlet king snake, and the red milk snake, have markings similar to the coral snake. On these, the red and black bands touch, not the red and yellow. If you’re in coral snake country and encounter a snake with red, yellow, and black bands, the best course is to leave it alone.

The nonvenomous snakes in Alabama also have round pupils and small heads. Another distinguishing characteristic of all nonvenomous snakes is the double row of scales on the underside of the tail. The coral snake also has a double row of scales, so you must rely on its markings to identify it as venomous. It is not advisable in any case to examine the underside of a live snake in order to identify it.



Snake scale comparisons

Because not all snakes are venomous and the majority of snakes in Alabama are nonvenomous, killing every snake you encounter is not necessary. The best course of action is to leave them alone. Be aware that many of the practices used on the job, such as raking pine straw and woody debris into piles, can provide good shelter for some snakes. For example, copperheads are fond of using old rock or wood piles as shelter and feeding areas. Use care when handling piles of pine straw and moving through areas of woody debris.

Endangered Species

An *endangered* species is one that is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range. A *threatened* species is one that is likely to become endangered in the foreseeable future. Alabama is home to a threatened species of snake – the Eastern indigo snake.

The Eastern indigo is a large, stout, black snake that often averages 6 feet in length and is the longest snake in



Eastern indigo

the United States. These nonvenomous snakes are most active during the day and rest at night. They often lay their eggs in the burrows of armadillos and gopher tortoises.

Because the Eastern indigo is a threatened species, you are not likely to encounter one while on the job. But you should know that it is unlawful to take, capture, kill, or attempt to take, capture, kill, possess, sell, trade for anything of monetary value, or offer to sell or trade for anything of monetary value any nongame wildlife species listed in our Nongame Species Regulation, which includes the Eastern Indigo snake. The state fine is a maximum of \$500 and a maximum of 6 months in jail or both.

If you see an Eastern indigo snake while on the job, contact Jim Armstrong at (334) 844-9233 to let researchers know when and where you saw it.

Conclusion

Working in Alabama's forests means that you will come across a variety of wildlife, including snakes. On average, about one person dies from snakebite in Alabama every 10 years. This indicates that much of the fear of snakes is not justified. Learn to identify venomous and nonvenomous snakes so you will know when you may be in danger. Most snakes are beneficial and desirable to have around and other snakes are so few in number that it is vital that we protect them so they will not become extinct.



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For more information, call your county Extension office. Look in your telephone directory under your county's name to find the number.

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