



Eastern Cottonmouth

Agkistrodon piscivorus

The Eastern cottonmouth derives its species' name, *piscivorus*, from the Latin term meaning "fish-eating." Its common name—cottonmouth—comes from the color of the inside of its mouth that is revealed when the snake defends itself.

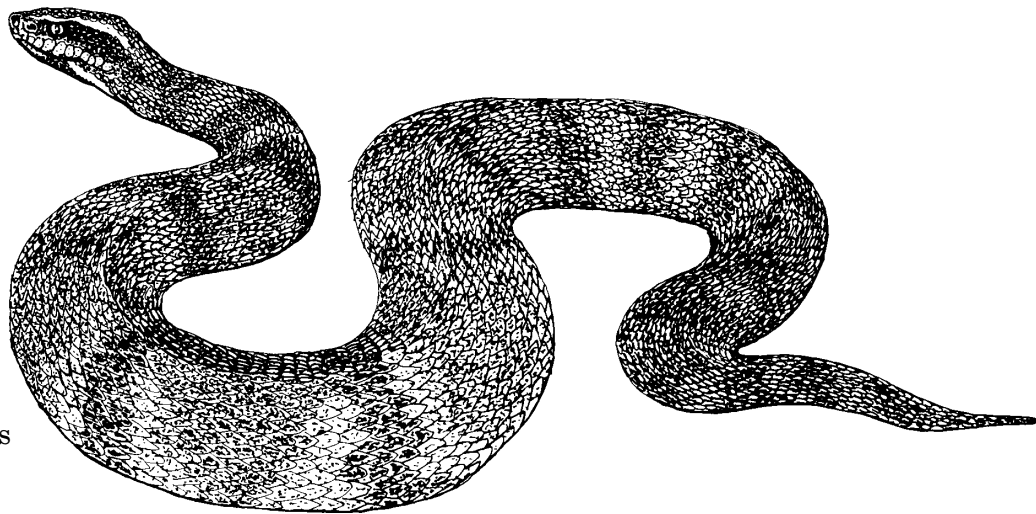
The cottonmouth is a member of the pit viper family that includes copperheads and rattlesnakes. Its venom ranks third in toxicity after that of the coral snake and the eastern diamond-back rattlesnake. Two species of the genus *Agkistrodon* occur in North America and in North Carolina—the copperhead (*A. con-tortrix*) and the cottonmouth or water moccasin (*A. piscivorus*).

History and Status

The cottonmouth is common in eastern North Carolina. The Eastern cottonmouth is currently neither on federal nor state species protection lists. However, as development increases in eastern North Carolina, loss of habitat could affect the cottonmouth population.

Description

The highly venomous cottonmouth, like all pit vipers, has a facial pit, but unlike rattlesnakes, it lacks a tail rattle. The scales under the tail are in one row, at least toward the head. The head is distinctly wider than the neck with a dark bar on both sides from the eye to the angle of the jaw. There are nine large scales on the crown of the head and the pupils of the eyes have elliptical shapes arranged vertically.



The Eastern cottonmouth is patterned with dark crossbands invaded by light olive or brown centers. Juveniles have bright, yellowish tail tips, and the details of the crossband pattern are most evident in this age group. Older individuals are often completely dark and unpatterned.

Habitat and Habits

The cottonmouth is the most aquatic of North American venomous snakes and is found in most eastern habitats associated with water: wet lowlands, marshes, swamps, sloughs, bayheads, ponds, lakes, streams in pine flatwoods, river bottoms, offshore keys and rice fields.

Like other cold-blooded reptiles the cottonmouth will seek warmth, sunning itself on branches, logs or stones at water's edge. It is most active at night and will become inactive at the onset of cold winter weather. The cottonmouth's favorite places to hibernate are on rocky wooded hillsides, in crayfish burrows, under rotting stumps and in mammal burrows.

If approached, some cottonmouths will retreat but others are aggressive and stand their ground. They coil, vibrate their

tail and open their mouth in a threatening pose. The mouth is white inside, and this gaping pose gives the cottonmouth its common name.

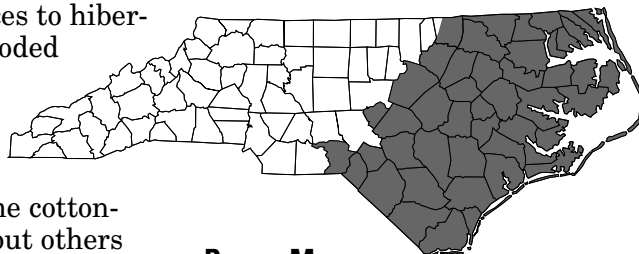
Like most other pit vipers, cottonmouths are viviparous and give birth to living young.

Range and Distribution

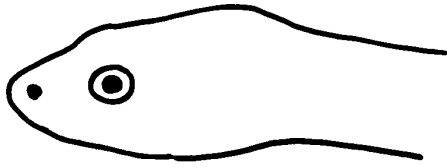
Eastern cottonmouths range from southeastern Virginia through eastern North and South Carolina, Georgia, Florida and Alabama. In North Carolina they are predominantly found in the Coastal Plain and on some of the Outer Banks. In a few places, they are the most abundant snake species. Records also exist from the lower Piedmont.

People Interactions

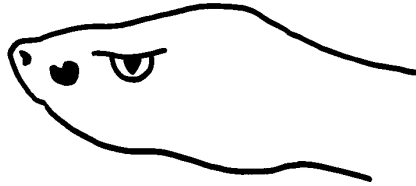
The eastern cottonmouth is venomous and should not be approached. Human mortality due to a cottonmouth bite is



Range Map:
Approximate range ■



Side view of harmless snake's head (round pupil, no pit).



Side view of pit viper's head (showing pit and elliptical pupil).

unreported for North Carolina, but it has been recorded elsewhere.

References

Leviton, Alan. *Reptiles and Amphibians of North America* (Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1970).

Martof, Bernard S., et al. *Amphibians and Reptiles of the Carolinas and Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1980).

Palmer, William. *Poisonous Snakes of North Carolina* (N.C. State Museum of Natural History, 1974).

Credits

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WILD Facts

EASTERN COTTONMOUTH

Classification

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Average Size

Adults measure between 3 and 4 feet, but are known to reach 6 feet in length. The record is 74 inches.

Food

Mostly fish, but they also eat small mammals, birds, lizards, snakes, amphibians and insects.

Breeding

Little is known of cottonmouth reproductive habits in North Carolina. A female is estimated to reach sexual maturity at 3 years and give birth August through September in alternate years.

Young

Strongly patterned with light-centered dark brown to reddish-brown cross-bands. A broad band is conspicuous from the eye to angle of jaw. The tip of the tail is yellow. Young born in captivity in late August and September ranged from approximately 9.5 to 10 inches at birth; 3 to 14 young per litter.