



Eastern Coral Snake

Micrurus fulvius

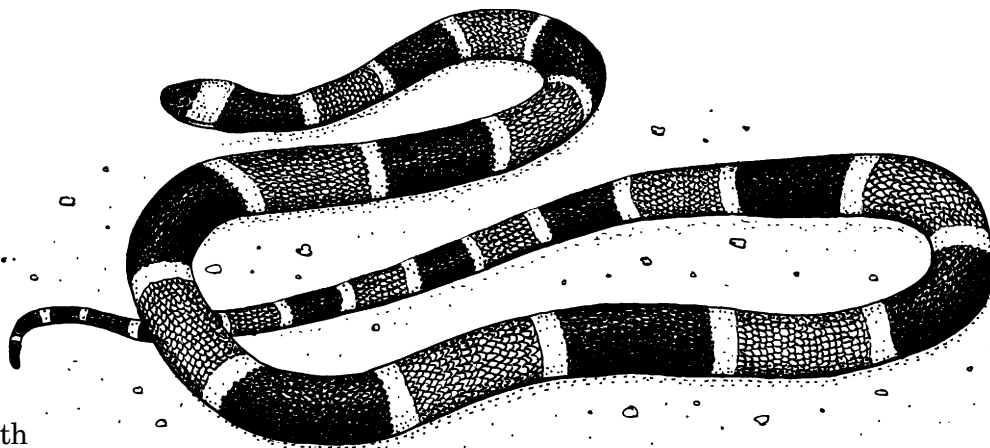
The beautiful, highly venomous coral snake takes its name from its bright colors, reminiscent of those found in some species of coral. It is North Carolina's only member of the cobra family and our only snake with strictly neurotoxic venom. Although its venom is more dangerous drop for drop than that of any of our other snakes, it is statistically the least dangerous of our six venomous species.

History and Status

The coral snake is one of North Carolina's most rarely encountered terrestrial vertebrates, and biologists consider it endangered in the state. Specimens may not be legally captured, killed, harmed or possessed without a special permit from the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission. Records concerning coral snakes exist from a total of 10 counties in the southeastern Coastal Plain and Sandhills, but there have been few verified sightings in the last decade. Many reported sightings are based on misidentifications of other species. Destruction and fragmentation of its habitat have contributed to the decline of this rare snake, and its future in the state is uncertain. The best remaining populations are probably in portions of Brunswick and New Hanover counties.

Description

The coral snake has smooth, shiny scales and alternating rings of red, yellow and black completely encircling its slender, cylindrical body. The relatively



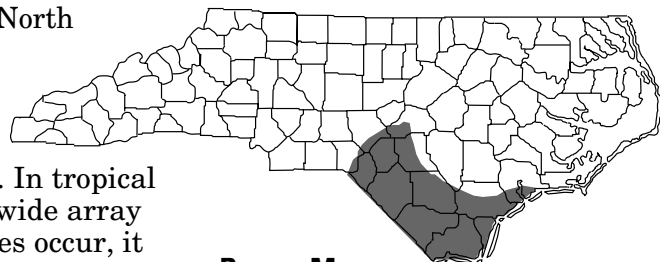
wide red and black bands are separated by narrow yellow bands, and the red bands are often peppered with black. The small head has a black snout followed by a broad yellow band, and the tail is banded with black and yellow.

Some nonvenomous snakes are often misidentified as coral snakes, especially the scarlet kingsnake (*Lampropeltis triangulum*) and the scarlet snake (*Cemophora coccinea*). These two small, uncommon, completely harmless species were once commonly regarded as "mimics" of the coral snake, but some evidence suggests otherwise. In both nonvenomous species, the snout is nearly always red, the red and black bands touch each other, and the red and yellow bands do not. The scarlet snake also has a plain white belly. A popular rhyme for distinguishing the eastern coral snake from nonvenomous species is "red on yellow can kill a fellow; red on black is venom lack." (There are other versions.) In North Carolina, the slim chance of encountering a coral snake makes this rhyme of little use. In tropical America, where a wide array of tri-banded snakes occur, it should never be used.

Habitat and Habits

In North Carolina, coral snakes are limited to sandy areas in the southeastern Coastal Plain. Favorite habitats are sand ridges, sandy pine flatwoods and maritime forests, usually with wiregrass, pines and scrub oaks. The snakes are highly secretive, spending most of their time burrowing beneath sand or surface litter, and they are active on the surface primarily in the early morning and late afternoon.

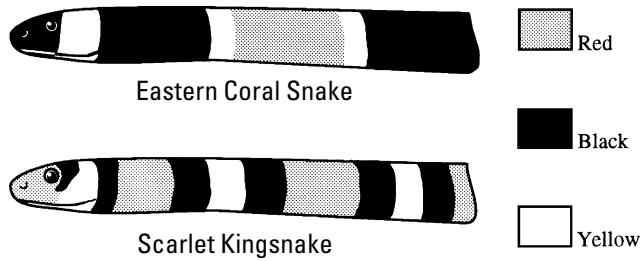
A coral snake's powerful venom is used to immobilize its prey—mostly small snakes. Coral snakes are unlikely to bite humans unless handled, and their small mouths and short fangs make it difficult for them to deliver venom effectively to most parts of the human anatomy other than fingers and toes. If disturbed, a coral snake quickly retreats. If cornered or restrained, it often hides



Range Map:

Occupied range

**WILD
Facts**



Eastern Coral Snake

Scarlet Kingsnake

its head and may elevate its tightly coiled tail as a “decoy” head.

Range and Distribution

The eastern coral snake occurs in the southeastern United States from southeastern North Carolina to southern Mississippi and eastern Louisiana. Additional subspecies occur in western Louisiana, southern Arkansas, southeastern Texas and eastern Mexico. The species reaches the northern edge of its range in North Carolina, where it still occurs in several scattered localities in the southeastern Coastal Plain and Sandhills.

People Interactions

Coral snakes are very seldom encountered by people in North Carolina, due to their rarity, secretive habits and limited distribution in the state. Their venom affects the central nervous system and may cause respiratory failure, paralysis and possibly death. However, there are no records of coral snake bites on humans in all of North Carolina’s recorded history. They are not aggressive and are much less efficient at delivering venom than other venomous snakes in the state. Being bitten by a coral snake would probably require handling or otherwise restraining the animal with bare hands or feet. Even then, a bite

might not occur, and if it did occur, venom might not be injected. Still, these snakes should never be handled or in any way molested or harmed. Left alone, they pose no threat. Any sightings should be documented with photographs if possible, and reported to the N.C. State Museum of Natural Sciences in Raleigh.

References

Conant, Roger, and Joseph T. Collins. *A Field Guide to Reptiles and Amphibians of Eastern and Central North America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991).
 Martof, Bernard S., William M. Palmer, Joseph R. Bailey, and Julian R. Harrison III. *Amphibians and Reptiles of the Carolinas and Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).
 Palmer, William M. *Poisonous Snakes of North Carolina* (Raleigh: N.C. State Museum of Natural History, 1974).
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Credits

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EASTERN CORAL SNAKE

Classification

Class: Reptilia
 Order: Squamata
 Family: Elapidae

Average Size

Length: 20 to 30 in. (record 47½ in.).

Food

Mostly small snakes, glass lizards and skinks.

Breeding

Virtually nothing is known about this snake’s breeding habits in North Carolina. No definite nests have been reported in the state. In other areas, females lay two to nine elongated, leathery-shelled eggs in a damp, sheltered spot in spring or early summer. Hatching occurs in late summer or early fall.

Young

7 to 9 in. long; independent upon hatching; resemble miniature adults.

Life Expectancy

Unknown; has lived well over 10 years in captivity.