

Keeping Clear of Copperheads

By Frederick Boyce

Of the six venomous snake species native to North Carolina, only copperheads are widespread and commonly encountered by people. The copperhead is the only venomous snake that can be found clear across the state, from the mountains to the sea, and is admittedly the reason that our state is often ranked as the state with the highest per capita number of snakebite cases each year.

Typically, however, there are no fatalities, for while it is certainly a most unpleasant and painful experience that requires prompt medical attention, a copperhead bite is hardly ever fatal to humans (or dogs), except in the presence of other medical complications. Dogs are remarkably resistant to copperhead venom, which is a good thing because, being dogs, they are able to sniff out snakes that are otherwise completely invisible to everyone else, and almost inevitably will stick their noses right into the center of the coils. The likely result will be a trip to the vet, who will usually just administer antibiotics, and a very swollen nose that will last a few days and hopefully impart a lesson about being more careful where one sticks said nose in the future.

The best way to avoid an unfortunate interaction with copperheads, or most any other wild creature living in one's neighborhood, is to learn as much as possible about their habits and behaviors, their comings and goings, what they look like, and how best to keep your distance and reduce the possibility of chance encounters.

Copperheads are *crepuscular*, meaning that they are most active at dusk or sometimes early in the morning, though I have more often encountered juveniles in the morning than adults. On favored days, which are the warm and sultry, still days of late spring and summer, they are most often abroad from late afternoon until an hour or two after dark. They are rarely encountered in broad daylight or in windy or breezy conditions. Being reptiles, they are naturally less active at lower temperatures. However, they are not at all averse to warm rains, which bring forth frogs, a favorite food in the spring and fall—but their primary prey is mice, and copperheads are a significant force for rodent control.



Adult copperhead. Note the small paired dots on top of the head, which are more like pores than markings. If they have a function, it is not known. Note how well the dead leaves blend with the snake's markings and the Hershey kiss-shaped pattern when viewed from the side.—Photo by Frederick Boyce

In early spring or late fall copperheads might be seen crossing a road in cooler weather on their way to and from their winter resting sites, which in our area often consist of rotted-out stumps with a network of old root cavities spreading deep underground. It is during the warm months—their peak months of activity—that accidents are most likely to happen, for that is when the snakes are actively foraging or else lying concealed in ambush for prey.

On warm evenings people should not walk barefoot or with unprotected legs and feet in or near wooded or overgrown areas, and children should not be allowed to play

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