

The Beautiful Coastal Cornsnake

By Frederick Boyce

So far, 2022 has been a pretty good year for cornsnakes. I have seen three of these beauties alive since March and only one killed on the shoulder of Highway 101 (where someone apparently swerved to hit it). Also known as red ratsnakes and sometime “red oaks,” cornsnakes are not all that uncommon in our area, but they are shy and secretive reptiles that rarely show themselves. I don’t often get to see one, but it’s always a treat when I do.

Considered by many to be among the most beautiful snakes in North America, cornsnakes have 34 to 47 narrowly spaced squarish red blotches, each one boldly outlined in black, that run straight down the back in a long row, accented by bright splashes of yellow along the sides. They actually bear very little resemblance to copperheads, with which they somehow seem to be often confused. Copperheads are shades of mostly brown, with no bright red or orange colors, and only 16 to 17 widely spaced dark bands that are much narrower in the middle than on the sides and which usually extend all the way across the snake from belly to belly. In addition, copperheads have a plain, unmarked head while cornsnakes have a pair of red stripes that begin on the neck and join between the eyes to form a signature spear point on top of the head that is diagnostic of this species.



An adult cornsnake rests at the entrance of a stump hole in early April. Note the spear-point marking on the top of the head.—Photos by Fred Boyce

The ground color of cornsnakes can be brown or orange—and sometimes bluish gray in the mountains, where they are much less common. The most colorful cornsnakes tend to be found along the coast, where they often live on barrier islands, even in the dunes close to the ocean. Coues and Yarrow recorded their presence on Bogue Banks in 1878, and they are still seen in the park around Fort Macon and occasionally in the Roosevelt Natural Area, though swampy and wet habitats are not as much to their liking.

Like all the ratsnakes, cornsnakes are shaped like a loaf of bread, having a rounded top with flat bellies, and the sharp edges along the sides of the belly give them an amazing ability to grip and climb far beyond that of our other snakes. In contrast to their red, orange and yellow upper decks, the flat bellies of cornsnakes are a bold checkerboard of black and white. When threatened,



A cornsnake climbing a dead pine tree in the Croatan National Forest, showing the maize-like pattern of red, orange and yellow along the side.

they will sometimes rise up, stacking their coils on top of each other as they rear backwards, exposing their black and white bellies in a behavior known as “bridging” that is probably meant to startle a would-be predator and give it a moment’s pause. Like most defensive behaviors employed by snakes, it’s a bluff (and you will never see a copperhead do this).

Cornsnakes are naturally very docile animals, and while they may bridge their coils, rattle their tails and even strike vigorously out of fear when first encountered, they quickly calm down and readily submit to gentle handling when picked up. This has led to their becoming one of the most popular pet snakes, perhaps second only to ball pythons in the captive bred snake trade. They have been so often bred in so many different genetic mutations and colors, much like parakeets or goldfish, that they are effectively domesticated.



In the spring, young cornsnakes often hide under loose bark, where this one was found on March 11.

To me, however, there is not much room to improve upon a natural coastal cornsnake. The name “cornsnake” is believed to be derived from the checkered belly pattern, which is said to resemble maize, or Indian corn, especially when the belly pattern is suffused with orange, as in some coastal specimens. To my

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