

# Cottonmouth Birthing, Part 2

By Frederick Boyce

## The attack

On September 8, the final day that I was able to visit the cottonmouth birthing sites, I climbed down the steep bank into the broad, nearly empty ditch, taking my usual seat on a log a few feet from the second nest site, which was located in the root ball of a fallen tree. While watching and photographing the five baby cottonmouths as they emerged for what should have been just another peaceful day of lazy sunbathing, I happened to glance up at the top of the bank to find myself staring into the distinctive black and white face of a large Eastern kingsnake. Well known for its *ophiophagus* (snake eating) tendencies, this formidable predator had obviously caught wind of the brood of baby cottonmouths below and was contemplating a meal of bite-sized appetizers.



The smaller green female with three remaining babies behind her realizes that they are being attacked.—Photos by Fred Boyce

Surprised by my unexpected presence, he took refuge in the pine needles atop the bank and disappeared for several hours. I continued to observe and photograph the newborn cottonmouths, still attended by the smaller green female with one eye who had watched over them so diligently all week. She had given birth to just a single neonate the Sunday before, a likely sign that she was a first-time mother. Meanwhile, a larger, darker female, the mother of the other four neonates, had remained hidden in the roots below.

Every so often I would stand up to check the pine needles on the bank above until finally, in the late afternoon, a black and white snout emerged, followed by the long shiny black body with its bold pattern of white chain-link. An impressive specimen about five feet in length, the kingsnake proceeded along the top of the bank until it was positioned directly above the nest site. I was experiencing a very mixed bag of emotions as I anticipated the opportunity to record something I had never seen in five years of watching cottonmouth births—a mother cottonmouth defending her babies against a predator.

As an impartial observer who was only here to document nature, I was also aware that under no circumstances could I interfere, no matter what happened.

With excruciating slowness, the kingsnake inched down the steep bank toward the root ball where the babies were basking. Extended to his full length all the way down the bank, his head was still a foot away from the four basking babies when he suddenly seized the well-camouflaged fifth baby that had been lying out by itself and quickly swept back up to the top of the bank where he swallowed it alive without bothering to constrict (squeeze) it. Neither the other neonates nor their guardian seemed aware that anything had happened.



The third baby cottonmouth tries in vain to fight back against the kingsnake.

This big kingsnake knew exactly what he was doing and was obviously a pro who had done this before. Having finished its small meal, the kingsnake began its slow descent a second time. One of the neonates seemed to realize that something was going on and began making its way toward an opening in the top of the root ball that led down into the chamber below. It was here that the first baby had been resting when it was snatched by the kingsnake, who was once again approaching the same spot from the other direction. I was hoping that this little one might pour itself down the hole to safety, but instead it stopped to investigate the place where its unfortunate sibling had been resting, smelling curiously with its tongue, as the huge kingsnake oozed ever closer. The suspense was nearly intolerable, and I was fighting an urge to either spook the baby down the hole or to simply grab the kingsnake and fling it up onto the bank, when it suddenly lunged and seized the second baby, again whisking it to the top of the bank to be devoured alive.

The little green guardian female finally realized that something was happening and began writhing in a strangely gyrating figure-eight coil similar to something the far more venomous saw-scaled vipers of Northern Africa do when they are threatened. I was expecting her to herd the other three babies to safety or to take some other defensive action when she suddenly fled in the opposite direction. Stiffening her body into an improvised toboggan sled, she slid down the side of the root ball to the ditch and swam away as fast as she could go, abandoning the remaining babies to their fate. My disappointment in her was intense as I stood watching the kingsnake make his third approach. This time he began disappearing down a hole and seemed to be entering the cavity below but was actually sneaking up on the three basking babies from behind.

(Continued on page 15)