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FS# 61644H

Encountering Snakes

Many 4-H clubs, programs and camps provide valuable outdoor experiences for youth. A typical concern for many youth and their parents is encountering a snake. It is an understandable concern as Florida is home to numerous snake species, a few of which are venomous.

What to Do When You Encounter a Snake

As with any other wildlife, keep your distance and give it its space. Encroaching on the animal will make it feel threatened and therefore, more apt to defend itself. If it is in your path, walk around the snake slowly while maintaining your distance. Keep in mind that a snake can strike the length of two thirds of its body. Never attempt to pick up or handle a snake in the wild and do not agitate a snake by poking at it. Snakes will typically flee when threatened, but not always. A snake may coil, hiss, shake its tail, and as a last resort or suddenly startled, strike when feeling threatened.

Coming across a snake can be a valuable teachable moment! Snakes play a large role in ecosystems and even benefit humans. Serving as predator and prey in the food chain, snakes help maintain a balance in nature and control mice and rat populations that can carry and transmit disease to people. The health of snakes can also provide an overall view of an ecosystem's health. They are unique animals that we do not get to see very often, even when spending a lot of time outdoors. Promote respect and emphasize the positives of these misunderstood creatures.

Identifying a Venomous Snake

There are six venomous species of snakes in Florida, five of which are pit vipers. The copperhead, cottonmouth/water moccasin, dusky pygmy rattlesnake, eastern diamondback rattlesnake, and the timber/canebrake rattlesnake are all pit vipers found in Florida. Pit vipers have certain characteristics that give themselves away as being venomous. Pit vipers are so named because of the heat-seeking pits on the side of their face and are sometimes visible. Elliptical pupils or "cat eyes" along with a fat v-shaped head that dramatically protrudes from the body also indicate a snake to be a pit viper. In addition to larger heads, pit vipers, in general, often have a fatter body than that of non-venomous snakes and rattles on the end of a tail is specific to rattlesnake species.



Copperhead (flmnh.ufl.edu, Krysko)

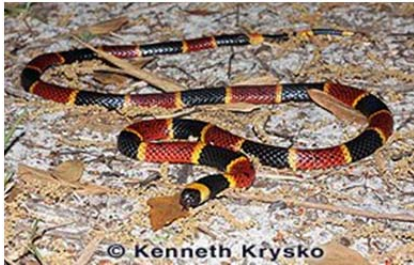


Cottonmouth (flmnh.ufl.edu, Krysko)



Eastern Diamondback (flmnh.ufl.edu, Krysko)

The coral snake, while venomous, is not a pit viper so it does not have those characteristics. It looks more like a non-venomous snake with its round pupils and narrow, rounded head. Coral snakes, however, have a certain color pattern with bright, thin yellow rings separating broader black and red rings and its venom is a potent neurotoxin. Scarlet king snakes are commonly confused with coral snakes and vice versa.



Coral Snake (flmnh.ufl.edu, Krysko)



Scarlet King Snake (flmnh.ufl.edu, Krysko)

What to Do If Bitten By a Snake

The first thing to do when bitten by a snake is to stay as calm as possible. Try to identify the snake if you can, clean the bite as you would do with any other type of wound and get to an emergency room as quickly as possible, especially if you know the snake is venomous. Antivenin is the only treatment for a venomous snake bite. DO NOT try to suck out the venom, make any cuts, kill/capture the snake, bring the snake to the hospital or tie a tourniquet.

Take-Aways

- Only six of the 45 native snake species in Florida are venomous.
- When encountering a snake, be calm, give it its space and admire it from a distance. Maintain a distance even if trying to identify it. A good way to ID a snake is to take a picture and using the zoom to enlarge its features. Never make it feel threatened or try to handle a snake.
- Snakes are important, but misunderstood animals that play a crucial role in nature and even benefit humans. Be sure to emphasize the positives.
- Capitalize on the teachable moment of observing a snake. Adaptations, camouflage, food chains/webs, biodiversity, ecosystems, facts about the snake itself, venomous versus non-venomous species and reptile characteristics are just a few things you could talk about.
- When walking in the wilderness stay on clear paths and look over rocks, logs, etc. before stepping over the object. When leading a hike, be sure to emphasize this and keep participants for which you are responsible behind you.
- If bitten by a snake, remain calm and seek medical attention, especially if bitten by a venomous or unknown snake species.

The University of Florida Snake Guide & More Information

<http://www.flmnh.ufl.edu/herpetology/herpetology.htm>

<http://www.flmnh.ufl.edu/herpetology/fl-guide/snakekey.htm>

<http://www.myfwc.com/conservation/you-conserve/wildlife/snakes/>