



## Copperhead

*Agkistrodon contortrix*

The copperhead is familiar, at least by name, to most North Carolinians. Deriving its common name from its coppery brown head, it is also known by such local names as “pilot,” “chunk-head,” “poplar leaf” and “highland moccasin.”

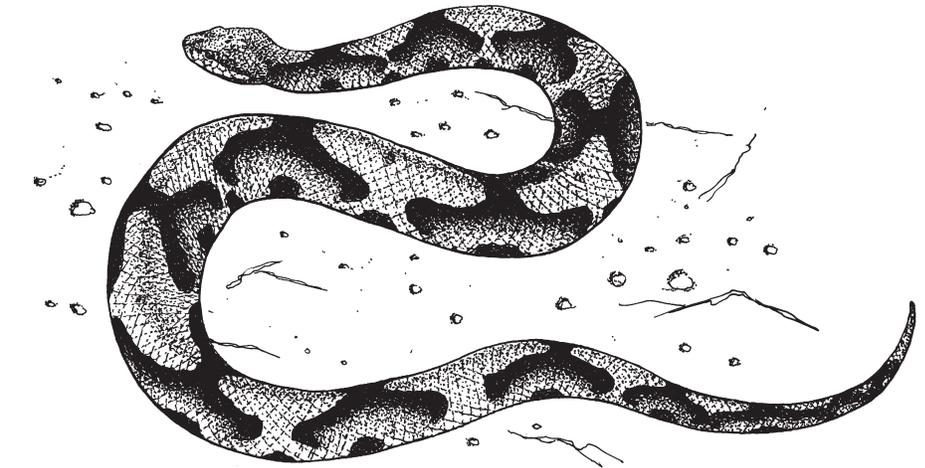
But most people are not as knowledgeable about the copperhead as they believe themselves to be—if they were, they would treat these interesting animals with more respect. Few creatures are more widely (and unjustly) feared and persecuted. Not only are huge numbers of copperheads deliberately killed simply because they are poisonous, but many nonvenomous snakes are mistaken for copperheads and killed. Those who truly know the copperhead can do no less than appreciate it.

### History and Status

The copperhead is the most common and widespread venomous snake in North Carolina. In many areas, including most of the larger urban regions, it is the only venomous snake. Many populations have been reduced, and some eliminated, by habitat destruction and individual persecution, but the adaptable copperhead remains common in many areas. It is not listed under any category of special protection.

### Description

The copperhead has a light brown, coppery or tan (sometimes grayish or pinkish tan) ground color, with strongly contrasting chestnut brown cross-



bands shaped like an hourglass or dumbbell—narrow in the center of the back and wide along the sides. Individual patterns vary—sometimes the bands may break up along the center, and some specimens have small dark spots between the bands—but nearly all individuals have at least some complete, hourglass-shaped crossbands.

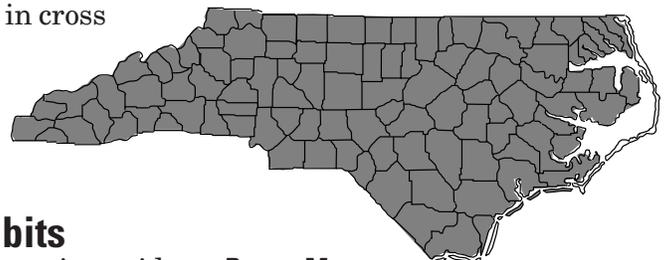
The head is somewhat triangular, quite distinct from the neck, and tan or copper in color, with a thin, dark line running from the eye to the rear of the jaw. The pupils are vertical and elliptical, and there is a heat-sensory pit between the eye and nostril. The top of the head is essentially unpatterned. The belly is usually whitish or yellowish white, sometimes mottled or stippled with brown or gray, with a series of dark brown or black spots or smudges along the sides. The dorsal scales are keeled, and the scales beneath the tail are usually undivided, except at the tip. The body is relatively stout and slightly triangular in cross section. Hinged, recurved, hollow fangs are present in the front of the upper jaw.

### Habitat and Habits

Copperheads occur in a wide variety of habitats, but they are

most often associated with woodlands. Favorite spots are those providing cover as well as some sun for basking, such as woodland edges, rocky south-facing slopes and ivy thickets. Old sawdust piles, slab piles, trash dumps and dilapidated buildings are good places to observe copperheads. They are frequently encountered on roads at night, and large numbers are killed by motor vehicles.

Copperheads may be active by day or night, but they are largely nocturnal in hot weather. They may hunt actively for food but are primarily very efficient “sit-and-wait” predators, feeding on virtually any animal of suitable size that ventures near. Prey items are quickly bitten and usually succumb to the hemotoxic venom within a few minutes. If a bitten animal runs a short distance before it dies, the snake has only to follow a scent trail to its fallen prey. Like all



**Range Map:**  
Occupied range

other snakes, copperheads swallow their prey whole. The venom may aid in digestion by breaking down the victim's tissues.

Copperhead predators include eastern kingsnakes, black racers and various carnivorous mammals and birds, which copperheads elude largely by hiding beneath sheltering objects or relying on their superb camouflage. If these tactics fail and a copperhead is discovered, it usually attempts to crawl quickly away. Individual temperament varies, but most specimens do not hesitate to bite in self-defense if restrained, cornered or otherwise provoked. Like most other snakes, they also release a potent musk from glands beneath the base of the tail, which may repel certain predators.

In winter, copperheads hibernate in stump holes, rock fissures or other sheltered areas below the frost line. Such sites may be shared with other snakes of the same or different species. Copperheads often emerge later in the spring than do some other snakes.

## Range and Distribution

Copperheads range from Massachusetts south to the Florida panhandle and west to southeastern Nebraska, southwestern Texas and northern Mexico. Five subspecies are currently recognized, two of which enter North Carolina—the northern copperhead (*A. c. mokasen*) in the Mountains, and intergrading populations of the northern copperhead and the southern copperhead (*A. c. contortrix*) over the remainder of the state. Copperheads occur in every North Carolina county, apparently absent only from the Outer Banks north of Bogue Banks, from the very highest elevations in the Mountains, and from some extremely urbanized areas.

## People Interactions

Copperheads account for probably over 90 percent of ven-



Copperhead Pattern

omous snakebites in North Carolina. A bite is painful and should be treated as serious, but it is not considered life threatening. Many bites occur when a hand or foot is carelessly placed on or very close to one of these wonderfully camouflaged snakes, but a large percentage occur while persons are attempting to capture, kill or handle copperheads. The great majority of bites can be prevented by exercising common sense: copperheads should be left strictly alone.

## References

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## Credits

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## WILD Facts

### COPPERHEAD

#### Classification

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

#### Average Size

24 to 36 in. The record is 53 in. Largest preserved North Carolina specimen is 46 in.

#### Food

Mostly rodents, shrews, lizards, snakes, frogs, salamanders and certain insects, such as large caterpillars and cicada nymphs.

#### Breeding

Copperheads are normally sexually mature at about 3 years of age. Breeding has been recorded both in the spring and in the late summer to early fall. A pair engaged in courtship may remain together for several days beneath a sheltering object. A female retains her eggs inside her body and gives birth to from 2 to 18 living young, usually in August, September or early October. Females have only one litter per year, and in many populations they may breed only every other year.

#### Young

8 to 10 in. long at birth. Young resemble adults except for a bright sulfur yellow tail tip.

#### Life Expectancy

Several captives have lived well over 20 years, and one lived to be over 30. Very few survive for nearly that long in the wild.