

The Copperhead's Mistaken Identity



The Copperhead:

The copperhead is one of the three venomous snakes found in Pennsylvania. This secretive snake typically resides in rock outcroppings, and around log, rock, brush, or sawdust piles. Proximity to a water supply is not a habitat requirement however they may sometimes be found near water sources.

The copperhead is a stout, heavy-bodied snake with strongly keeled scales. The head of a copperhead is triangular and disproportionately large compared to the thickness of its neck giving it a distinct shovel-like shape. Similar to that of a cat, a copperhead's eyes are vertically elliptical.

A copperhead's background coloration can vary from a pinkish brown, tan, or even a grayish brown. Reddish brown saddles, that resemble hour glasses when viewed from above, run the length of the body. These saddles are lighter colored in the center and become gradually darker towards the outside edges. Small dark spots are often present in the light area between the snake's bands.

What makes the snake different?

In comparison to the northern water snake and the eastern milk snake, the head is a solid, coppery brown and the triangle shape is distinct. The water and milk snake have markings on the head and the water snake only flattens out its head into a triangle shape when disturbed. The pupils of the copperhead are vertically elliptical, whereas the other two snakes are rounded.

The Northern Watersnake:

With its large head and bulky body, the northern water snake is often confused for the copperhead. This very common, non-venomous snake almost always occurs in close proximity to water. Water snakes are beneficial to the habitat they live in because they prey on weaker and often unhealthy fish thus allowing fish populations to grow stronger.

The confusion occurs due to the fact that water snakes have a large head and similar body size to that of the copperhead. Water snakes can also be heavily patterned but the pattern does not resemble a copperhead's hour glasses. The pattern of the northern water snake is opposite that of a copperhead, with blotches being wider at the middle of the back and becoming narrower towards the belly. Water snakes are variable in color and pattern but typically have a grayish brown background color and a series of large, reddish brown blotches. Along the sides there are often smaller rectangular blotches. Sometimes these blotches are offset from the larger ones and in some individuals, they may merge together. The pattern of older water snakes tends to be subdued and harder to see than that of younger water snakes.

The head of the water snake only appears triangular when it feels threatened and takes a defensive posture. Otherwise, the head is generally oval and slightly larger than the neck. The water snake has circular pupils, unlike the copperhead which has elliptical "cat eyes".

It is also worth noting that the northern water snake is often confused for the water moccasin. The water moccasin (cottonmouth) is a venomous, southern species that reaches the northernmost part of its range in southern Virginia. Water moccasins, despite urban legend, do not occur in Pennsylvania.



The Eastern Milk Snake:

Another snake which is commonly misidentified as a copperhead is the eastern milk snake. This confusion is the result of the variable coloration of the milk snake which occasionally may resemble that of a copperhead. While the colors may be similar, there are many differences which allow a person to distinguish between harmless milk snakes and copperheads.

Milk snakes almost always have a "V", "U", or "Y" shaped blotch where their bodies meet their heads. The blotches along the body are square-like and vary from light to dark brown and are bordered by black. Unlike a copperhead, the blotches do not extend onto the sides of the body, and they do not resemble the hourglass shape of a copperhead. The sides of a milk snake have alternating rows of smaller, usually black-bordered blotches.

The body and head shape are good identifiable features to help differentiate between the two species. In cross section, the body of the milk snake is round whereas a copperhead's body is more oblong. The milk snake's head is approximately the same width or slightly wider than the neck, as compared to the broad, triangular shaped head of the copperhead that is very distinct from the neck.

Milk snakes are often found in the same general habitat as copperheads, however in most areas of Pennsylvania, milk snakes are more common. Milk snakes are also more likely to be found living in close proximity to humans. Milk snakes thrive by preying on rodents that are attracted to debris around homes and farms. These harmless and beneficial snakes have also been known to enter basements and barns following the scent trails of rodents.

More information:

In Pennsylvania the Copperhead is a species of concern in PA.

For more information and photos on these snakes please refer to the PA HERP ID website at <http://www.paherps.com> we would also be happy to help you in identifying your snake. You can reach us through our contact form.

Written by: Jeff Slawson & Jason Poston
Photos By: Jeff Hanky, Billy Brown, Rex Everett, Wayne Fidler, Jason Poston