

## NatureNotes

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### **Jim King of Kingsport, Tennessee asks, “Just how common are copperheads in this region, and how dangerous are they really?”**

Well to start with, let's put it this way: in this region, copperheads are not nearly as common as *stories* about copperheads; and those stories are rarely becoming of the snakes. They certainly reside here, though, and in some areas, they can indeed be quite common. And though they warrant our caution and respect (as does any wild animal), they do not deserve our hatred and fear.

Copperheads are pit vipers which belong to the species *Agkistrodon contortix*, and the one race that occurs locally is the Northern Copperhead (*Agkistrodon contortix mokasen*). Though they can be found in a variety of habitats, by far, their most common and preferred habitat is rocky ledges and outcrops in mountainous terrain, lending the snake to one of its colloquial names, “highland moccasin”. It is in these areas that they hunt for their primary food source...small rodents, which they dispatch by injecting their venom through hypodermic needle-like fangs.

So, what about the venom? It is important to first mention that venom is the result of a hunting strategy, and not a villainous scheme to torment humankind! Think of venom as a meal ticket; every time a copperhead delivers its venom load into an animal that it cannot eat (like a person), that is one meal completely wasted. For this reason, despite stories of copperhead aggression, this is one of our more mild-mannered snakes! Also, their venom is some of the mildest snake venom in North America, and though fatalities have been recorded, they are so rare that the venom is not considered to be lethal. The bites certainly are painful, though, and the best way to avoid them is to learn to recognize and avoid the snakes altogether. The Northern Copperhead is best identified by its copper-colored head, stout body with darker “saddles” going down the back, and a short stubby tail.

The truth is, copperheads are not worthy of the horrifying stigma that they so often receive. In fact, they do far more good than harm, as they are an integral part of our ecosystem, and are very adept at keeping pest populations down. It has been suggested that everyone who spends much time in the outdoors of the Southeast has been well within range of a copperhead bite, but continued unhindered, without ever knowing the snake was even there! Always remember never to attempt to handle any wild animal, especially a venomous snake, and they will nearly always return the favor.

To submit *your* nature question, write to: Steele Creek Nature Center, P.O. Box 1189, Bristol, Tenn., 37621. You can also e-mail [jstout@bristoltn.org](mailto:jstout@bristoltn.org).

**- Jeremy B. Stout, Naturalist**