

## **HAVE YOU SEEN THIS SNAKE?**

### **THE NORTHERN COPPERHEAD**



Tennessee is the home to 32 species of snakes, 4 of which are venomous. All snakes in Tennessee are protected by law. Therefore, it is illegal to harm, kill, remove from the wild, or possess native snakes taken from the wild without a permit. All venomous snakes in Tennessee are in the group called the pit vipers. Pit vipers are heavy bodied snakes with a specialized heat sensing pit on the front of their head. All of our venomous snakes also have vertical, elliptical shaped eye pupils. One of the more abundant pit vipers in Tennessee is the northern copperhead. The northern copperhead can be considered common on the Oak Ridge Reservation (ORR), and is the only venomous snake known to frequent the reservation.



**Copperhead showing distinctive elliptical shaped eye pupil and face pit**

The northern copperhead is a very stocky snake with a base color of tan, peach or pink. They have dark, chestnut-colored saddles across the back, which are widest at the sides and narrowest in the middle of the back. The head often has a very coppery appearance, hence the common name. Adults range from 26 to 36 inches in length. Young copperheads are lighter in color than the adults, and they have a yellow-tipped tail that they often flick. Copperheads eat small rodents, birds, lizards, snakes, frogs and insects.

Certain non-venomous snakes may be mistaken for copperheads. The eastern milk snake has similar colorations. However, the markings on this species are widest at the center of the back instead of on the sides. The eastern hognose snake can be distinguished from the copperhead by its turned up snout, and unusual behavior of hissing and flattening its head and neck when threatened. If this doesn't scare away the intruder, the hognose may also roll over and play dead. The hognose may vary in color to almost black. Another similar looking species, the northern water snake seldom wanders far from the water and retreats back to the water when alarmed. The markings on the water snake are also widest on the back instead of on the sides. None of these species will have the elliptical eye pupils or face pit of the venomous copperhead.



**Eastern Milk Snake**



**Eastern Hognose Snake**



**Northern Water Snake**

Copperheads can be found in most all habitats, although they often prefer to be near streams and other waterways. They may be found on hilltops and lowlands. It is not unusual to find copperheads in forested or undeveloped areas within or near suburban developments. During the winter they hibernate with other snakes, sometimes even with other species of snakes. As with many other snake species, the northern copperhead is active during the day in the spring and fall and active at night in the summer. People sometimes see these snakes at night after a summer rain shower, lying on warm, wet road pavement. They may also be seen warming themselves on pavement and other warm surfaces on cool fall or spring days.

Copperheads rely on camouflage for cover and safety. Their coloration and patterning works well for this in the dead leaves of the forest floor. Generally shy and lethargic, they typically prefer to retreat rather than risk an encounter, but, when disturbed they will often vibrate their tail, making a rattling noise when in the dead leaves. An agitated copperhead will typically do the rapid tail vibration prior to striking. However, unless stepped on, grabbed, or passed by in close proximity, copperheads will not normally strike and bite.

Snakes, in general, do us a service by naturally controlling rodent populations. Therefore, they serve an important role in the ecosystem, and the northern copperhead does its part. Be alert and aware with the upcoming cool fall days that snakes may be out sunning themselves on warm surfaces, such as walkways, parking lots and roads. Please leave them plenty of room.

If you do encounter a snake on the ORNL campus, please contact the LSS at 574-6606. If you experience a snake problem at your home, there are pest control businesses that specialize in nuisance wildlife and wildlife damage control listed in the yellow pages.