

Snake season

By **BILL DEYOUNG**

bill.deyoung@scripps.com

June 10, 2006

Summertime, and the slitherin' is easy.

Snakes like Florida almost as much as Midwestern tourists do. Like all reptiles, snakes are cold-blooded, which means their metabolism is going full-tilt when the summer sun is keeping everything toasty.

And when the weather's warm, snakes are going to come in contact with people. It's an unavoidable part of life in paradise.

Out of about 30 species of snakes indigenous to Florida, six are venomous. Of those, four are found on the Treasure Coast.

"The phone is ringing off the hook, and most people are assuming that what they've found is a venomous snake," says David Hitzig, executive director of the Jupiter-based Busch Wildlife Sanctuary. "I've been here since 1992, and I get calls every day about snakes."

Inevitably, the caller wants someone to take the snake away; the snake just wants to go about its business. "Snakes don't want to have anything to do with people," Hitzig explains.

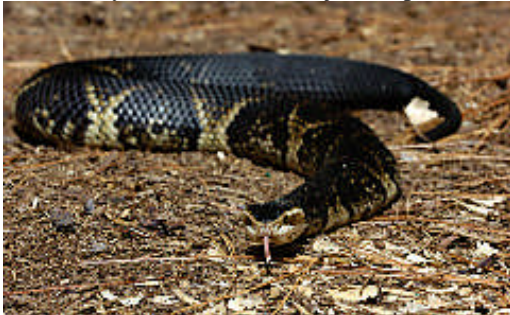
Although they can be extremely dangerous, even fatal, to humans, the toxins carried by venomous snakes are for subduing the reptile's swallowable prey — lizards, frogs and the like.

"I don't know of anybody who's ever been bitten while gardening or walking through their back yard," says Hitzig.

"Every situation that I'm aware of, it was someone doing something they shouldn't have and got themselves bitten. If you use common sense, you are not going to get hurt."

Water moccasin

Description: Thick-bodied, olive-brown to black, rarely exceeds three feet. Wide head with a dark band extending from the eye to the rear of the jaw. A protective shield over the eyes gives the snake a brooding look.



What to watch for: Can be aggressive or docile, quick or sluggish. When alarmed, the snake will sometimes coil loosely and open its mouth wide in a threatening gesture; the inside is white, which is where the nickname "cottonmouth" comes from.

Habitat: A water snake, the moccasin is a great swimmer. Look for it along stream and river banks, around lakes and marshes, where it feeds on fish, frogs and smaller snakes. Rests on piles of debris or grassy patches, sometimes in the low branches of overhanging trees, near water. Unlike common, harmless water snakes, it swims with its head fully out of the water.

Venom: A pit viper (injects poison) without rattles. Although extremely painful, the bite is rarely fatal.

Pygmy rattlesnake

Description: Gray and marked with rounded, dusky-reddish spots, the stout-bodied pygmy rattler rarely reaches 20 inches in length.



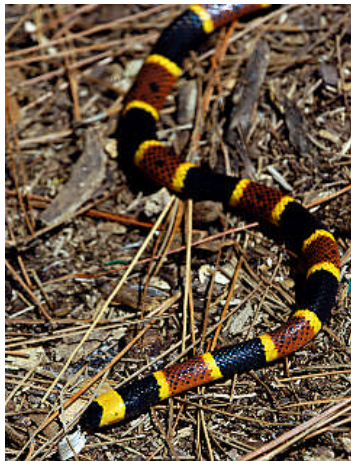
What to watch for: Will coil and strike like all true pit vipers. Its tiny rattle sounds like the buzz of an insect.

Habitat: Palmetto scrub, pine woods, slash pine and wire grass. Alongside lakes, ponds and marshes.

Venom: It's nasty, and it hurts, but its small size greatly reduces the risk of serious biological damage. No fatalities have been recorded.

Eastern coral snake

Description: Slender-bodied and rarely reaching more than 2 feet in length (although specimens up to 47 inches have been recorded). Bright color bands alternate yellow, red and black.



What to watch for: Closely resembles the harmless scarlet snake and the scarlet kingsnake, which have the same colors in slightly different combinations. It's best to remember that only the coral snake's nose is black; the "mimic snakes" have red noses.

Habitat: Heavy leaf litter, forest floors, pond borders, rotting logs. Shy and secretive, the snake craves cover to hunt for lizards, skinks and frogs.

Venom: Although the coral snake has the narrow head and round pupils of nonvenomous snakes, it has the most lethal venom of all Florida reptiles. Still, it is not aggressive and has small fangs; therefore it must get a good hold and "chew" to inject venom. Potentially fatal but easily avoided.

Eastern diamondback rattlesnake

Description: Sandy (yellowish) brown and black with a distinctive diamond pattern running the length of the snake. Can reach 7 to 8 feet. Thick, muscled body with a wide, triangular-shaped head.



What to watch for: The most aggressive Florida snake, this hot-tempered pit viper will assume a coiled, defensive position when startled, although it does not always issue a warning from the bony "rattles" inside its tail. Can repeatedly strike from this position, although it is also able to strike without coiling.

Habitat: Palmetto scrub, pine woods, brushy or grassy areas, abandoned fields. Feeds on rabbits, squirrels, rats, mice and birds.

Venom: Muscles behind the hypodermic-like fangs inject venom into the victim. Not usually fatal, but can result in great pain and massive tissue loss.

Source: *Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission*

Fast facts

- Leave them alone! Snakes are looking for food, water, shelter, a change in temperature or other snakes to mate with. They don't care about people and have no interest in them, harmful or otherwise.
- To reduce the risk of snakes on your property, keep vegetation and leaf litter to a minimum, encourage shrubs that grow several inches above ground, remove clutter that snakes (and the prey they seek) can hide under.
- Should you encounter a snake indoors: Don't bother it. It will most likely be gone in a few minutes, trying to get back outside.
- If that's not good enough for you, try identifying the snake by calling the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission: (561) 625-5122 (for Martin and St. Lucie Counties), or (772) 778-5094 (for Indian River County). Many private exterminators will come to your house, for a fee, and remove the snake.

Source: *University of Florida Cooperative Extension Service and Palm Beach Herpetological Society, and www.snakebitenews.com*

REPRINTED FROM THE PORT ST LUCIE NEWS JUNE 10th, 2006