

# Eastern Copperhead

*Agkistrodon contortrix*

## Upland Snake Species Profile

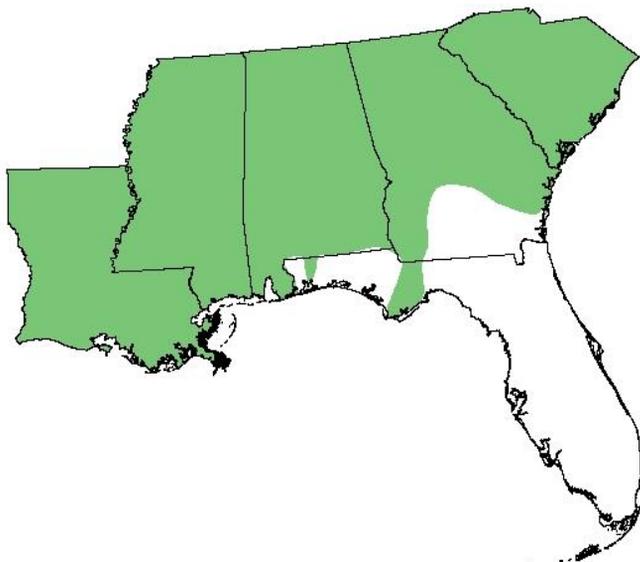


### Name Game

The genus, *Agkistrodon*, and species name, *contortrix*, are contractions of Greek words. The genus refers to the snake's fangs, ankistron: fishhook, and odontos: tooth. The species name describes the snake's behavior, contortus: twisted, and rix: performer.

**Range and Appearance:** Copperheads are named after the distinct copper coloration on their heads. They have light brown to tan bodies, sometimes with a pinkish-hue. They have dark brown hourglass-shaped saddles, or "Hershey kisses", down their sides. Young snakes resemble adults, but also have a yellow tail tip used for caudal luring. Copperheads are absent from much of Florida and southeastern Georgia, but otherwise can be found throughout the Southeast. Range wide, Eastern copperheads can be found from Massachusetts through Central Texas. Copperheads are frequently confused with venomous cottonmouths and non-venomous corn snakes. Cottonmouths have a large dark band through the eye, and corn snakes have reddish blotches on their bodies and lack hourglass markings.

**Natural History:** Copperheads are found in many terrestrial habitats including mountainous terrain; hardwood, pine, and mixed forests; farmlands; ruderal habitats; and suburban areas. Copperheads are typically active at night, though they may exhibit daytime activity during cooler months. Copperheads primarily hibernate alone in the Southeastern Coastal Plain, whereas in the northern parts of their range, animals generally hibernate deep within rock crevices with many other individuals. Copperheads have a broad diet and prey on small mammals, birds, lizards, amphibians, large insects, and even other snakes. Adults average 50-95 cm long (20-37 in), though large males can exceed 127 cm (50 in). These snakes can breed in both the spring and fall. Sperm from fall mating events is stored over winter. Females give live birth between June and October. An average clutch is 4-8 individuals, though clutches of over 20 neonates have been reported.



**Upland Snake  
Conservation Initiative**

[www.gophertortoisecouncil.org](http://www.gophertortoisecouncil.org)

# Eastern Copperhead

*Agkistrodon contortrix*



*Copperheads give live birth in late summer through early fall. Neonates have yellow tails and are able to deliver venomous bites. How many babies can you count in this picture?*

**Copperhead Myths:** There are many myths about copperheads, and snakes in general. Two of the most common copperhead myths are:

**Myth:** If you smell cucumbers in the woods, you are near a copperhead.

**Fact:** This is somewhat true, but also misleading. All snakes can produce a musky scent when threatened, and a copperhead's musk can have a cucumber-like aroma. However, a snake typically does not musk unless it is bothered. Even when threatened, a snake may choose not to release its musk. Therefore, a person could be inches away from a copperhead and not smell it.

**Myth:** Copperheads, and other venomous species, will mate with non-venomous snakes including "black snakes" (i.e., black racers and rat snakes), to create dangerously fast and venomous snakes.

**Fact:** This is not biologically possible. Copperheads belong to the viper family, Viperidae, while racers and rat snakes belong to Colubridae. Because of the taxonomic differences, these species cannot interbreed. In the northern parts of the copperhead's range, they often share communal hibernacula with racers and rat snakes, which may have led to this myth's inception.

**Conservation Challenges:** Copperheads can be relatively abundant in their southeastern range within areas of suitable upland habitat, including residential communities. Some states have implemented protections in the northern portions of their range where populations are declining.



*Several snake species including cottonmouths (middle photo) and corn snakes (bottom photo) are often misidentified as copperheads (top photo).*

**For More Information:**

Gibbons, W. 2017. Snakes of the Eastern United States. University of Georgia Press, Athens, GA.

Willson, J. D. and K. M. Andrews. 2008. Copperhead. Pp. 424-426, *In* J. Jensen, C. Camp, W. Gibbons, and M. Elliot (Eds.). The Amphibians and Reptiles of Georgia. University of Georgia Press, Athens, GA.