

Copperhead Snake (Northern)

(22"-53") The copperhead is a poisonous snake with a broad triangular head, vertically elliptical pupils and a heat sensitive pit between each eye and nostril. The body is pinkish to grayish brown with brown or reddish-brown crossbands that are narrow on the back and widest on the sides. Small dark spots commonly occur between crossbands on the back. The unpatterned head is dull orange, copper or rusty-red. Body scales are keeled and the belly is pink or light brown with dark blotches along the sides. When young, a copperhead has a yellow-tipped tail.

Mating takes place in spring and fall and females give birth to 4-8 young in August and September. Adult females usually give birth every two years. The young twitch their yellow tipped tail to lure prey.

Copperheads prefer rocky, forested hillsides with rock outcrops above streams or ponds and wetlands for habitat. Wet areas are particularly sought out in the hot summer months. Small mammals and frogs account for most of the prey items taken, but birds, insects (large caterpillars and cicadas) and other snakes are also important parts of their diets. It basks during the day in spring and fall, becoming nocturnal as the days grow warmer. Favored summer retreats are stone walls, piles of debris, sawdust heaps, and rotting logs, and large flat stones near streams. When approached, they will either move away quietly or lay motionless, relying on camouflage to protect them. Occasionally, they will vibrate their tails. Bites usually occur when people unknowingly step on or touch unseen snakes. Despite the poisonous nature of copperhead bites, they are rarely fatal. In Massachusetts, copperheads are so rare and reclusive that people almost never encounter them.

