

# Venomous Snakes in S. Florida, Part 1, by Ron Meyers

## "Snakes...why'd it have to be snakes?"

*Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*

First, let's address the elephant in the room. For millennia, the thought of snakes, let alone the sight of them, have brought fear and terror among people. And while, yes, there are four medically significant snake species in the US and Florida; the Coral Snake, 32 Rattlesnake species, Water Moccasin/Cottonmouth and Copperhead, the chance of your encountering one of these is slim. In fact in my 22 years of living in Florida, I have only seen one small Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake, *and I look for them!*



Eastern Coral Snake



Dusky Pygmy Rattlesnake



Copperhead



Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake



Water Moccasin/Cottonmouth

### QUESTION:

What's the deadliest venomous snake in America?

### ANSWER:

The one that just bit you!

Every year in the US, an estimated 7,000-8,000 people are bitten by venomous snakes and *only about 5 of those people die*. The fact of the matter is that if you encounter a snake, whether venomous or not, *unless you accidentally find yourself on top of it*, just stop, as calmly as possible assess the situation, and slowly back up.

### **IS IT POISONOUS OR VENOMOUS?**

If a snake INJECTS venom into you, it is VENOMOUS, ex. all of the snakes listed above.

If you EAT A SNAKE that feeds on POISONOUS amphibians, etc. and you become ill after eating the snake, then the snake is POISONOUS, ex. the common Garter Snake.

The Garter Snake (NOT Garden Snake) often eats poisonous (NOT venomous) toads like the Cane Toad which then causes their flesh to become poisonous. If you would then eat the Garter Snake you would have ingested the toxins/poison and effectively poisoned yourself. The Garter Snake does not inject venom into you and is not considered medically significant.

So what's all the fuss about?

Throughout history snakes have been maligned in religion, art, lore and in more modern times in literature, film, you name it. But is this warranted?

So what if you unfortunately do find yourself accidentally on top of a venomous snake while hiking, walking or even in your yard? What should you do? **STAND COMPLETELY STILL!** Do not try to run, or worse yet, scare the snake away; you will only make the snake feel threatened and more likely to strike. Most of our venomous snakes are ambush predators and will sit quietly for hours along prey item trails waiting for their dinner to come to them. If you happen upon one, remember, you are much bigger than they are so they will view you as a threat, not a source of food. Therefore, **stay still and stay calm**. Chances are they will either slowly move on or you will be able to then slowly back up. I can tell you from several personal experiences with Western Diamondback Rattlesnakes that when accidentally happening upon them and they rear up into full attack mode, just freezing so as to let them feel that they are not under direct threat/attack de-escalates the situation. After a minute, they calm down and either slither away in an opposite direction or allow you to slowly back up. Most people get bitten because they accidentally step on a snake, harass them, or try to pick them up. Now, you're not going to do that, are you? Exactly. Just don't move, keep calm and assess the situation.

### **Here is what you need to do if bitten:**

- Stay calm Call 911 immediately
- Immobilize the bitten area with a compression bandage above the wound if possible
- Keep the affected area below the heart Limit your movement-keep your heart beating as close to normal as possible
- Remove all jewelry (rings, watches, bracelets, etc.) and restrictive clothing before swelling occurs
- Safely try to identify the snake that bit you by patterns, color and size.

## **Prevention Tips**

- Be cautious around shrubs, tall grass and areas surrounding lakes, canals and swamps
- Always wear protective gloves and shoes while working outdoors
- Look before sitting, stepping or reaching around rocks and logs
- Avoid placing hands in areas that are hidden or concealed
- Use caution when cleaning up debris, especially after a storm or flood

You should know that if you happen to be bitten by a venomous snake, Miami has one of the finest treatment facilities in the US, 1-800-222-1222.

In Part 2, I will present a primer on common Florida snakes in our area that will help you identify them in your rare encounters.

### *About the author*

Ron Meyers has lived in South Florida for the past 22 years, the last 2 years in Naples Reserve. He is a graduate of Boston University with a degree in Biology, with Distinction. Ron has co-authored several research papers in herpetology (study of reptiles and amphibians) and entomology (study of insects.)