

Conservation Corner

by James Cummins
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The arrival of spring and summer is accompanied by more outdoor activities, especially water activities. Along with this increase in outdoor activity comes an increase in encounters with reptiles. And when it comes to my favorite reptile—ole no-shoulders—everyone has their own story. However, my columns are not about how close I was to being bitten (because I was trying to catch a cottonmouth) or about my Grandfather (Arnold) Herring, when he was bitten by a chicken snake as he was gathering eggs one morning. The two most common types of snakes we see around water in Mississippi are the diamondback water snake (non-poisonous) and the cottonmouth (poisonous). In fact, both of these snakes are sometimes called

“water moccasins.” Many times these two snakes are mistaken for each other. Below, we’ll discuss these snakes. The diamondback water snake derives its name from the square to diamond-shaped dark bordered areas on its back. The border’s dark lines are connected and constitute a chain-like configuration. For a non-poisonous snake, the diamondback water snake is very heavy bodied and can reach lengths of up to 63 inches. Males are slightly shorter than females. Diamondback water snakes can be found in almost any type of wet area from slow flowing streams, rivers, and bayous to non-flowing bodies of water such as cypress swamps, ponds, lakes, and reservoirs. In the southern portion of Mississippi, diamondbacks can be

found any time of the year, but in the northern parts of our state, it must hibernate. The diamondback water snake primarily feeds at night, but occasionally during the day. In summer, activity during the day is primarily limited to basking in the sun. Cottonmouths live in almost any type of wetland from brackish marshes of the Gulf Coastal Plain to streams, ponds, lakes, rivers, and cypress swamps and bayous of the rest of the Magnolia State. Occasionally, these snakes are found on land away from any permanent water source. During spring and fall, cottonmouths are very active during daylight hours, predominantly during early morning and late afternoon. During summer, when temperatures become extremely hot, they become nocturnal and move frequently under the cover of darkness, during cooler temperatures. Adult diamondback water snakes are preyed upon by cottonmouths, alligators,

gars, and otters. Humans kill the largest amount since this species of snake is mistaken for the cottonmouth. When disturbed, diamondbacks quickly go to water. When handled, they can viciously bite and spray musk. “Most people will be quick to admit that they have a real fear of snakes. Even the slightest mention of the word ‘snake’ may cause some people to become uneasy. This fear of snakes is a learned behavior which is brought on by years of listening to legends and superstitions concerning snakes,” states Rob Ballinger, a wildlife biologist for Wildlife Mississippi. The problem most people encounter is the ability to properly identify snakes. Of the 50 plus species of snakes found in Mississippi, only six are poisonous. They are the copperhead, cottonmouth (or water moccasin), pigmy rattlesnake, timber (or canebrake) rattlesnake, Eastern diamondback rattlesnake, and the coral snake. The first five are pit vipers. The

coral snake is akin to cobras. There are approximately 100 to 200 venomous snake bites per year in Mississippi. Ballinger states that when a snake is encountered, the best thing to do is leave it alone. Avoidance is the best policy. Most people bitten by snakes have provoked the snake either intentionally or by accident. Contrary to popular belief, snakes are not aggressive. When spending time in the outdoors, always try to walk in clear areas, paying close attention to where you are stepping. Wear leather boots at least 10” high. When fishing, watch the tree limbs where the snakes may be basking in the sun. According to Dr. William McKell of Ridgeland, Mississippi, in the event of a snake bite, try to stay as calm as possible. Any increase in heart rate will, in turn, increase the rate that venom is distributed throughout the body. If possible, kill and identify the snake. Arrange for transportation to a hospi-

tal emergency room immediately. Try to position the bitten area below the level of the heart. Remove watches, rings, and other constricting jewelry. Incision and suction are no longer recommended. “Tourniquets” are out. It is, however, almost universally recommended that a large “constricting band” at a level between the bite site and the heart be applied. Taking care not to constrict arterial blood flow, this band should allow your little finger to slip under it. Do not use ice for it has been shown to cause further tissue damage. If the patient is within an hour or so from an emergency room, first aid measures such as the constricting band may be omitted. “Snakes are an important ecological component and are useful to all of us because they consume large numbers of rodents. Never try to kill a snake unless it is threatening your life or the life of another person.” concluded Ballinger.

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