

Conservation Corner

by James Cummins
Executive Director of Wildlife Mississippi

The conservation of habitat plays an important role for Mississippi. Conservation easements are one of the most landowner-friendly conservation tools to preserve a particular conservation ethic. Easements enable a landowner to protect habitat while at the same time, taking advantage of federal tax benefits.

The federal government, specifically the Internal Revenue Service, recognizes that a conservation easement has potential public benefits and as such could qualify the owner for a substantial tax deduction.

The easiest way to understand conservation easements is to look at rights that come with owning land. When a conservation easement is placed on a property, the owner may give up certain rights (e.g., developing the property). Restrictions on the property are specified in the easement document, which must be perpetual in order to receive tax benefits. The easement document is a legal instrument that is filed with the Chancery Clerk's office in the county of record.

There are three important aspects of any conservation easement that must be met. First, the easement must meet a definite conservation purpose. The pri-

mary purpose, in most cases, would be the protection and/or restoration of important habitats. Second, in order to qualify for a conservation easement, the easement must be granted to or be held by a "qualified conservation organization," such as the Mississippi Land Trust. The easement gives the organization the right and responsibility to monitor and enforce the restrictions placed on the property and ensure adherence to the easement document. A third, but equally important aspect of the conservation easement process, is the development of what is referred to as a baseline ecological assessment. It is an ecological "snapshot" of the property and records the condition and uses of the property.

Except for the restrictions described by the easement, the property owner retains all other rights. Hunting, fishing, and forest management can still be conducted.

When one places a conservation easement on the property, the owner can be assured that it will remain in a natural state forever. The property owner is rewarded by the fact that the easement will promote his or her conservation ethic while receiving immediate tax benefits. Conservation easements are

increasingly being recognized as a tool for property owners. Through the efforts of landowners we can be assured that Mississippi's cherished natural resources will be passed on to future generations.

If you are possibly interested in placing a conservation easement on your property, or would like more information, contact the Mississippi Land Trust, PO Box 23, Stoneville, MS 38776.

James L. Cummins is executive director of Wildlife Mississippi, a non-profit, conservation organization founded to conserve, restore and enhance fish, wildlife and plant resources through-

Now that the weather has warmed-up and people are getting outside, there will be an increase in activity in the homes of reptiles, so a likely encounter is greater.

Included among the many reptile species of Mississippi is the cottonmouth, or water moccasin as it is commonly called. It derives its name from the white inner-mouth, which is commonly exposed when the snake is threatened.

The cottonmouth is a very heavy-bodied, large pit viper, usually 30 to 42 inches in length and is one of

the most abundant snakes found in the South. Cottonmouths found in Mississippi are of the Eastern subspecies and the adults are usually a light brown to tawny-yellow color with light faces. However, adult cottonmouths found in the Delta of Mississippi are of the Western subspecies and are olive, dark brown, or black in color.

Juvenile cottonmouths are generally lighter in color than the adults. Coloration is generally reddish cross bands on a pink or rusty-ground color with yellow to greenish tails. As juveniles continue to age, they lose these characteristics and after 2 or 3 years acquire the coloration of adults.

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.

Breeding usually takes place in August and September and the offspring are born 1 year later. After breeding, cottonmouths begin to leave their aquatic habitat for adjacent upland areas where hibernation will take place. Usually by November, cottonmouths have totally disappeared from aquatic areas.

Cottonmouths are op-

portunistic feeders. Dead or diseased fish make up most of their diet, but these snakes will also feed on small mammals, birds, insects, frogs, and other snakes.

According to Terry L. Vandeventer, a professional herpetologist, contrary to popular belief, cottonmouths are not aggressive, but defensive. "In many instances cottonmouths will retreat at the approach of a human, but when an encounter cannot be avoided, it will defend its ground," stated Vandeventer. "When a snake is encountered the best thing to do is leave it alone. Take two steps backward and avoid the snake."

James L. Cummins is executive director of Wildlife Mississippi, a non-profit, conservation organization founded to conserve, restore and enhance fish, wildlife and plant resources throughout Mississippi. Their web site is www.wildlifemiss.org.

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