

**“At times, the pain was unbearable...”**

# Fright at First Bite: Copperhead Encounter

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**O**n the last leg of a week-long summer vacation with her two small children, Natalie Kramer of Dilley never dreamed she would end their trip with a copperhead bite.

After visiting her family in East Texas, Natalie decided to stop and visit some friends in Crockett. The visit was pleasant; the children played; the adults barbecued and caught up on all the latest family stories.

Just as the sun had set on Sunday, June 12, friends convinced the family of three to stay the night and head home the following day.

As Natalie and her two young daughters were walking to the pickup truck to gather their suitcases, she was struck.

“At first I thought a stick had just poked me,” Natalie said. “The pain was increasing with each step I took. So I got in the truck and looked down and saw that I had been bitten. I went back to look and there it was... a copperhead snake.”

More concerned with her daughters’ safety than her own injury, Natalie grabbed a .22-caliber rifle and shot the snake.

Natalie was in excruciating pain. Her friends began their trek to the nearest hospital that was 20 minutes away. She felt as though the journey took an hour.

It was dark. The road was twisty.

The group had to travel slower than the posted speed limit because of the risk of deer on the road.

Once at the hospital, Natalie was given morphine for the pain and kept for 12 hours under observation.

“It hurt so bad,” she recalls. “They wouldn’t give me anti-venom because it was such a small hospital, or antibiotics because they didn’t want to interfere with the venom. At times, the pain was unbearable.”

During the stay, Natalie experienced issues with her blood pressure and was repeatedly checked by doctors to monitor the pulse and blood flow in her injured leg.

Emergency personnel marked her leg several times in the same spot to monitor her pulse and any venom spread. A baby

heart monitor was placed on her leg to make sure the blood flow was okay.

Doctors worried her blood could clot.



Two days later, despite abiding by all the recommended protocol given to her by the doctor, Natalie returned to the hospital due to swelling, pain and her foot turning purple.

Once she arrived at the hospital, she discovered that her foot and leg were covered in red dots. This, she later learned, was a direct affect of fever.

Doctors ran a series of tests that included bloodwork which, for the first time in three days, gave Natalie some hope.

“There are no signs of clotting or anything bad,” the doctor said.

She was released and directed to stay off her feet until the swelling went down

and the pain subsided.

It has been four months since Natalie was bitten by the copperhead snake that was camouflaged among leaf litter. She continues to deal with the effects of the bite.

“The weather has changed and my ankle and knee are sore,” she says, looking down at her leg. “The initial swelling lasted six weeks but I know I will be dealing with long-term issues.”

Copperheads strike immediately and without any warning signs. Their hemotoxic venom often results in temporary tissue damage to the immediate area of the bite.

Of all snakes found in North America, copperheads are the most likely to bite. Their venom, however, is relatively mild and their bites are rarely fatal to humans.

Copperheads, just like rattlesnakes, are pit vipers.

Pit vipers have heat-sensory depressions between their eyes and nostrils on each side of the head, enabling them able to detect the slightest differences in temperature so that they can accurately strike the source of heat.

With distinctly patterned hourglass-shaped markings, copperheads have a dorsal pattern that is a series of dark, chestnut-brown or reddish-brown crossbands that are on a lighter brown, tan, salmon or pinkish background.

Tolerant of habitat alteration, copperheads can survive well in any area and can be found in wood and sawdust piles, abandoned farm buildings, construction areas, under rocks and boards.

During the spring and fall, the snakes are usually out during the day. They become nocturnal during the summer. Biologists have noted that copperheads like wandering in the open after rain has made weather conditions humid.

“This encounter has definitely made me more careful when walking in the dark,” Natalie says. “My kids have also become more cautious. And I can honestly say that I fear snakes a lot more now than I ever have before.”

