

CASES OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY

A comparison of commonly confused Northeastern venomous and non-venomous snakes

VENOMOUS

NON-VENOMOUS



Timber Rattlesnake

Crotalus horridus

- Recognized by a tall rattle, a shovel head, facial pits (see picture), and vertical pupils.
- Adult length: 36-54 inches
- Typically a yellowish color with brown or black bands down its back.
- Found in deciduous forests on rugged terrain.
- Hibernates in rocky crevices and dens.
- Endangered in several Northeastern states: NJ, VT, MA, and NH.



Facial Pit



Eastern Hognose

Heterodon platirhinos

- Distinguished by an upturned snout (see picture), lack of facial pits, and round pupils.
- Adult length: 18-45 inches
- Variable coloration; can be spotted yellow or all black.
- Found in woodlands with dry sandy areas.
- When threatened the hognose will flatten its neck and bring its head up off the ground.
- It may also play dead.



Copperhead

Agkistrodon contortrix

- Recognized by a copper/brown/red shovel head, facial pits (see picture), and vertical pupils.
- Adult length: 24-36 inches
- Juveniles have tails with yellow tips.
- Found in forests, rocky outcrops, and farmland/fields.
- Endangered in MA.



Facial Pit



Eastern Milk Snake

Lampropeltis triangulum

- Distinguished by a Y or V on the top of its head, tapered tail, a lack of facial pits, and rounded pupils.
- Adult length: 24-36 inches
- Typically has bands of red/brown/black down its body. Its underbelly is checkered white and black.
- Found in fields, forests, or rocky outcrops.
- Has a broad range across the Northeast.



Cottonmouth

Agkistrodon piscivorus

- Recognized by black "hourglass" bands on its back, a flattened head, facial pits (see picture), and vertical pupils.
- Adult length: 30-48 inches
- When threatened the cottonmouth will expose a white mouth.
- Found near freshwater.
- Range does not extend further north than Virginia.



Facial Pit



Northern Water Snake

Nerodia sipedon

- Distinguished by dark bands down its body, a narrow head, a slender body, a lack of facial pits, and round pupils.
- Adult length: 24-42 inches
- Coloration can be brown, reddish, gray, or black.
- Found near freshwater.
- Has a broad range across the Northeast.

Quick Tips:

- Venomous snakes are very rare in the Northeast.
- Snakes are shy creatures and will typically not attack unless disturbed.
- Venom is meant for prey, not protection.
- Non-venomous snakes will also vibrate their tails when agitated.
- All Northeastern species of venomous snakes have heat sensing facial pits and vertical pupils.

Why Are Snakes Important?

- Snakes are an essential part of ecosystems because they act as both predator and prey. Their absence can alter the balance of a food web.
- Snakes control populations of smaller animals. This directly impacts humans because smaller mammals can spread disease, for example the deer mouse that spreads Lyme disease.