

# Copperhead

## *Agkistrodon contortrix*

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*Agkistrodon* is derived from ankistron and odon which in Greek mean “fishhook” and “tooth or teeth;” referring to the curved fangs of this species. *Contortrix* is derived from Latin meaning “twisted or contorted.”

### IDENTIFICATION

**Appearance:** The copperhead is a moderately sized, stout-bodied, venomous snake that typically measures 24 to 36 inches in total length. Its head is reddish-brown in color and its body is tan. The body is marked with 15 to 19 mahogany lateral bands with darker edges that are wide on the sides and narrow on the back. Viewed from above, the patterning on the back appears hourglass shaped, though the blotches are occasionally interrupted along the midline. Additional, irregular brown spots are found between the “hourglasses.” The copperhead has a wedge-shaped head, sensory pits, and vertically elliptical “cat-like” pupils. Juvenile copperheads have a yellow-tipped tail, which they may use to attract prey.



Scott Gibson



Bryan Eads

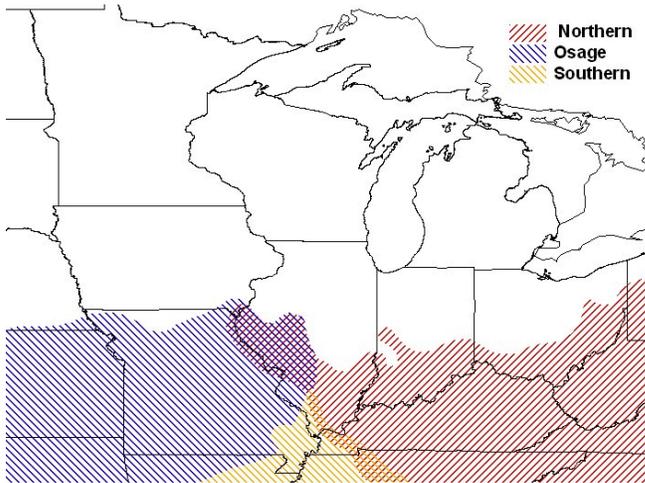
**Subspecies:** Three of the five recognized subspecies are found in the Midwest. The Northern Copperhead (*A. c. mokasen*) (pictured here) is red to brown with a bright copper-colored head. Its belly is cream to pink and marked with dark spots on the outer edges. The cross bands of the Osage Copperhead (*A. c. phaeogaster*) may be edged with white and tend to contrast with the lighter background color. The Southern Copperhead (*A. c. contortrix*) is relatively paler than the Northern

Copperhead, sometimes appearing to be pinkish in color. Its cross bands tend to be narrower and often interrupted at the midline of the back.

**Confusing species:** The non-venomous watersnakes (*Nerodia*) are commonly confused with Copperheads. However, Copperheads do not routinely stay around water, and none of the Midwestern watersnakes have the “hourglass” color pattern described above. Watersnakes also lack facial pits (seen in the picture above) that are present in all pit-vipers.

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## DISTRIBUTION AND STATUS



The distribution of the Northern Copperhead extends from Delaware and Massachusetts, west to southern Illinois and south to northern Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. The map to the left shows the overall range in the Midwest, as well as the range of each of the various subspecies. Within its range, the Copperhead is likely the most common venomous snake in the Midwest.

## ECOLOGY AND BEHAVIOR

The copperhead is found in high, dry, rocky and well-forested areas dominated by oaks and hickories. However, the Southern Copperhead can often be found in low wet areas. It can be found under and in logs, in cracks of foundations, under rocks and in deep leaf litter. Copperheads have a broad diet consisting of small rodents such as mice, lizards, amphibians and large insects. This species is secretive and tends to avoid areas with a lot of human activity. The copperhead is active at night during the warmest part of the year and is more likely to defend itself when encountered in exposed situations. The copperhead typically mates in the late spring but some individuals may mate in the fall before returning to their hibernacula. Gravid females can often be found in aggregations at or near hollow logs or rocky crevices where they typically give live birth to 4-8 young every other year.



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