

COTTONMOUTH

Agkistrodon piscivorus

Agkistrodon is derived from ankistron and odon which in Greek mean “fishhook” and “tooth or teeth;” referring to the curved fangs of this species. *Piscivorus* is derived from piscis and voro which in Latin mean “fish” and “to eat”. Another common name for cottonmouth is water moccasin.

The Cottonmouth is **venomous**. While its bite is rarely fatal, tissue damage is likely to occur and can be severe if not treated promptly.

IDENTIFICATION

Appearance: The cottonmouth is a stout-bodied venomous snake that reaches lengths of 30 to 42 inches as adults. Most adults are uniformly dark brown, olive, or black, tending to lose the cross banded patterning with age. Some individuals may have a dark cheek stripe (upper right image). The cottonmouth has the diagnostic features of the pit-viper family such as a wedge-shaped head, sensory pits between the eyes and nostrils, and vertical “cat-like” pupils. Juveniles are lighter and more boldly patterned with a yellow coloration toward the tip of the tail (lower right image). Dorsal scales are weakly keeled, and the subcaudal scales form only one row. Cottonmouths also have a single anal plate.

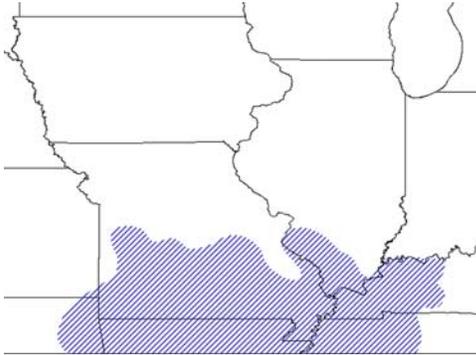


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Subspecies: There are three subspecies of the cottonmouth. The Western Cottonmouth (*A. p. leucostoma*) is the only subspecies found in the Midwest. The term *leucostoma* refers to the white interior of mouth.

Confusing Species: The non-venomous watersnakes (*Nerodia*) are commonly confused with Cottonmouths across their range, simply because they are snakes in water. Thus it is important to note that Cottonmouths are only found in southernmost Midwest. *Nerodia* also lack the facial pits present in all pit-vipers. Juvenile cottonmouths may be mistaken for juvenile copperheads given similar patterning and yellow tipped tails.

DISTRIBUTION AND STATUS:



The Western Cottonmouth can be found in Kentucky, Tennessee, southern Illinois, and it has been found in only two locations in southern Indiana. It can be found south to Alabama and Texas, west to Oklahoma and into southern Missouri. The Western Cottonmouth is an endangered species in Indiana.



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ECOLOGY AND BEHAVIOR:

The Cottonmouth is semi-aquatic and inhabits a variety of wetland habitats including swamps, lakes, ponds, rivers and ditches. It has a broad diet consisting mainly of fish along with amphibians, small rodents, lizards, insects, and even other snakes. The Cottonmouth is active primarily at night, but it may also be active during daylight hours during the spring and fall, especially at the southern extremity of its range. This species typically mates during late spring but may also mate in the fall before returning to hibernacula. The Cottonmouth gives live birth to an average of seven young, generally during late fall or early summer.

The Cottonmouth may often be seen basking near the edge of the water on logs, stumps, or overhanging branches. When approached, this relatively slow-moving snake will often hold its ground rather than flee. If threatened, it may vibrate its tail rapidly. If this threat display proves ineffectual, it may attempt to flee or throw its head in the air with mouth agape exposing the inner white lining (lower right image). It is this behavior that gives it the name “Cottonmouth.”



Mike Redmer

