



Jesse H. Jones Park & Nature Center

20634 Kenswick Drive • Humble, Texas 77338 • (281) 446-8588

Snakes Alive!

Many home owners reap the rewards of a well-cultivated garden—harvesting fruits and vegetables, enjoying the sights of colorful flowers, and attracting wildlife like squirrels, birds, butterflies, and snakes. SNAKES!?

For many, the mere thought of a slithering snake cultivates its own images—a nasty bite and a trip to the emergency room. But the fact is that of the more than 30 snakes in Harris County, only three are venomous. And having these slithering creatures around keeps the local rodent population from causing a much greater problem. With a little knowledge, you too can learn to share your yard with those legless, scaly creatures.



The Southern Copperhead is one of three venomous snakes found in Harris County. It can reach three to four feet in length and is easily identified by the dark brown Hershey's Kiss®-shaped markings down the side of its body.

Dispelling the Myths

Unfortunately, no matter what type of snake you may encounter in your yard, chances are good that friends or neighbors will identify it as a water moccasin, copperhead, rattlesnake, or some other venomous snake. The likelihood of this being the case, however, is relatively small. The three venomous snakes common to Harris County are the Southern Copperhead, (*Agkistrodon contortrix contortrix*); the Western Cottonmouth, (*Agkistrodon piscivorus leucostoma*); and the Texas Coral Snake, (*Micrurus fulvius tener*). All three are easily identified if you know what to look for.

First of all, there are some identification techniques that should not be used.

- Not all venomous snakes have an arrowhead-shaped head. Many harmless snakes, such as water snakes, rat snakes, and ribbon snakes flatten their heads when alarmed, while the highly-venomous Texas Coral Snake has a smooth, rounded head, making this identification method completely false.
- Not all venomous snakes have vertically-slit pupils, or “cat-eyes.” And, let’s face it—if you’re so close that you can see what kind of slits the snake has, you’re probably too close.
- A rattlesnake cannot be identified solely by the rattling of its tail. Rat snakes, ribbon snakes, water snakes, and other harmless species all vibrate their tails when threatened. This can sound like a buzzing rattlesnake’s tail if it vibrates against dry leaves, paper, or other surfaces.

Getting an ID

The Southern Copperhead can reach three to four feet in length and is easily identified by the dark brown Hershey's Kiss®-shaped markings down the sides of its body. Even a newborn baby Southern Copperhead has these markings. Those small solid brown snakes often seen lurking under landscape plants are not copperheads!

How many times have you seen a brown or black snake slithering in the water and shrieked "water moccasin!" Actually, there is no such thing as a water moccasin, and there is no information on water moccasins in any of the current books on Texas snakes. The only venomous aquatic snake in Harris County is the Western Cottonmouth. And, there are four kinds of harmless water snakes that are much more common in urban areas than the Western Cottonmouth. A sure-fire way to identify the Western Cottonmouth is by its well-defined dark stripe down the side of its head. This mark is very similar to the dark mask across a raccoon's face and resembles the mask of Zorro.

By far, the area's most easily identified venomous snake is the Texas Coral Snake. Its bright red, yellow, and black rings make this snake unmistakable. This is the only snake with this dazzling array of colors that is active during the day. Harmless milk snakes share the red, black, and yellowish rings of the Texas Coral Snake, but are nocturnal. Your best bet is to treat all snakes with this pattern as a coral snake. After all, caution is the best way to prevent accidents.

Although there are those who believe there are rattlesnakes in Harris County, there have been no recorded sightings for at least 15 years. Most sightings turn out to be very upset Texas Rat Snakes, (*Elaphe obsoleta lindheimerii*), furiously vibrating their rattleless tails in an effort to ward off attackers.

Although coming across a snake in your yard may be a less than ideal situation, with a little basic knowledge, you can find the experience one to grow on.

By Mike Howlett, Naturalist, Jesse H. Jones Park & Nature Center, Summer 2003