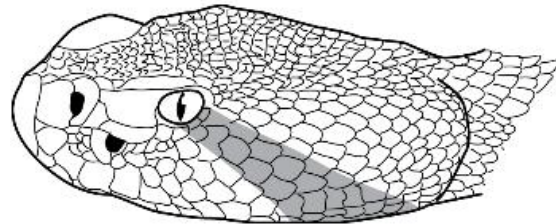


Are rattlesnakes poisonous?

Florida is home to 46 species of native snakes, six of which are venomous, not poisonous. The term “poisonous” refers to something that is toxic when ingested while “venomous” means secreting venom, by way of a bite or sting. The venomous species include five pit vipers (Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake, Timber Rattlesnake, Pigmy Rattlesnake, Southern copperhead, and Cottonmouth) and the Coral Snake.

The five species of pit vipers found in Florida all share several characteristics. The pupils of their eyes are vertical (cat-like) and they have a deep facial pit between each eye and nostril (Figure 1). These characteristics can be difficult to see unless a snake is examined closely, so do not rely on these signs to differentiate venomous from non-venomous snakes. Florida's pit vipers have blocky, triangular-shaped heads that are distinctly broader than their necks. Relative to their length, these species are heavy-bodied snakes.

Figure 1.



"Pit vipers" get their name from the heat-sensing pit located between the eye and the nostril. The pit is used to locate prey.

Credits: Dale A. Johnson 2007

Although each of the six venomous species of snakes in Florida have unique characteristics that allow them to be readily identified by experts, there are many non-venomous species that look similar to venomous snakes. Therefore, it is best not to attempt to capture, harass, or harm any snake. Doing so may put you at risk of being bitten by a venomous species.

What types of rattlesnakes are found in central Florida?

Figure 2.



Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake

Credits: Steve A. Johnson, U.S. Geological Survey

Timber Rattlesnakes have a limited range in Florida, found only in northern Florida as far south as Gainesville and in limited portions of the Panhandle. The other two types of rattlesnakes, Eastern Diamondback and Pigmy, are found throughout the state.

Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake

This is a very dangerous snake and should not be approached. The Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake is Florida's largest venomous snake and may exceed six feet in length. It occurs throughout Florida in a variety of dry habitats, such as pinelands, scrub, and golf courses.

Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnakes have bold markings down their backs that include a row of large, dark diamonds with brown centers and cream-colored borders (Figure 2). The tail ends in a rattle that is used to make a loud rattling sound when the snake

feels threatened. Some individuals may not rattle even when they are poised to strike. The large, thick head has a light-bordered, dark facial band running diagonally through the eye to the rear of the jaw. The scales of this species are strongly keeled (i.e., there is a ridge along the center of each scale), giving these snakes a rough appearance. Young Eastern Diamondback rattlesnakes are similar to adults in color pattern.

Pigmy Rattlesnake

Pigmy Rattlesnakes are the smallest of Florida's venomous snakes. Adults rarely exceed 20 inches in length. Pigmy Rattlesnakes can be found in many different habitats that include pine flatwoods, oak scrub, open pinelands, and palm hammocks.

This is one of the most commonly encountered venomous snakes found occasionally in residential neighborhoods. Pigmy Rattlesnakes have a dark facial band that runs from each eye to the rear of the jaw (Figure 3). Their bodies are covered with numerous dark blotches with a row of darker blotches running down the middle of the snake's back. Usually a series of reddish-brown marks can be seen between the blotches on the back.

The rattle on the tip of the tail of this species is so small that it cannot be heard even when shaken vigorously by the snake. Pigmy Rattlesnakes are bold and will often hold their ground if approached.

Figure 3.



Pigmy Rattlesnake

Credits: Steve A. Johnson, U.S. Geological Survey

What should I do if I see a rattlesnake?



Interactions between snakes, people and pets in Florida's residential areas are inevitable. Most of these encounters will involve one of the many species of non-venomous snakes that are native to Florida. Nonetheless, there will be times when people and pets come into contact with one of the six species of venomous snakes that live in the state. In many of these situations, a negative encounter can be avoided by simply leaving the snake alone. Attempting to harass, handle, or kill a venomous snake greatly increases your chances of being bitten, so it is critical that you adopt a "leave it be" attitude toward all snakes.

Resources:

<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/uw229>
<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/uw261>

Find answers to your questions at: AskExtension.org or write your question into our Ask an Agent Box.

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