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## Western North Carolina Home To Two Venomous Snake Species

By Whitney Heavner

Anita Gomez was weeding in her garden when she felt something sharp cut through her skin. The two puncture wounds in her hand indicated that she had been bitten by a pit viper. Since she did not hear the tell-tale rattle that would have revealed the Timber Rattlesnake as the source of her wound, the Northern Copperhead, the only other venomous snake in Western North Carolina, most likely bit her. Gomez's case is unique in that she did not see the snake before she was bitten.

### Non-Aggression

According to Parkway biologist Bob Cherry, recent studies have shown that the majority of snakebites involve the hands and alcohol. Furthermore, most snakebite victims are male and between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four years, demonstrating that snakes usually bite only when prodded and provoked.

In fact, Cherry has seen snakes of all types completely ignore people who walk by them. Therefore, the best way to avoid a snakebite is to leave the snake alone. Indeed, a rattlesnake's rattle is its way of asking to be left alone, not approached or killed. Likewise, copperheads are shy and reclusive, avoiding danger by remaining motionless, hiding behind their protective camouflage.

### Federal Protection

Snakes may play a significant role in regional folklore, but they are also vital to local ecosystems. Specifically, snakes help to control insect and rodent populations, sometimes even eating other snakes. So if a snake is near a house, it is probably there because rodents also inhabit the area.

Furthermore, it is against the law to kill a snake in a national park such as the Blue Ridge Parkway. Therefore, if you see a snake on a trail, it is best just to leave it alone, especially since snake populations are rapidly declining. Indeed, Cherry said that every year people bring him snakes that they have killed, believing that they have thus increased the safety of other Parkway



Copperhead

### What to Do If You Are Bitten in the Wild

- Remain calm
- Remove rings and tight clothing around the bite
- Restrict activity and immobilize bite area
- Keep bite area below level of heart
- May create a constriction band just above the bite
- Make sure 2 fingers fit between constriction band and skin
- Do not drink alcohol
- Seek medical attention
- For trouble breathing, seizures or fainting, call 911 or operator

### How to Avoid Snakebites

- Leave snake alone
- Wear thick boots and long socks or long

vacationers. In actuality, most of these unfortunate reptiles are non-venomous and once played an important role in Parkway ecosystems.

## Northern Copperheads and Timber Rattlesnakes

There are only two venomous snake species in Western North Carolina, the Northern Copperhead and the Timber Rattlesnake. Contrary to popular belief, this region of the state is too cold for Water Moccasins, which inhabit the coastal regions of North Carolina. However, the Northern Water Snake, a non-venomous species that is declining in population, resembles the Water Moccasin and can be found in the North Carolina mountains.

pants

- Stay on clearly marked trails
- Stay out of tall grass
- Do not step or reach into area you cannot see
- Trim overgrown areas with lots of ground debris

Unlike non-venomous snakes, venomous snakes generally have triangular-shaped heads, visible heat-sensitive pits on the sides of the face, and vertically elliptical pupils that open to become almost round in dim light. Non-venomous snakes have round pupils in all light intensities.

Specifically, the rattlesnake can be easily identified by its trademark rattle. Likewise, the copperhead can be identified by the copper-colored patch on the top of its head. Similarly, its markings resemble a string of rust-colored hourglasses, as the hourglass is a “warning sign” elsewhere in nature — on the black widow spider, for instance. Also, young copperheads have a noticeable lemon-colored tail that helps to attract its prey, which includes lizards and frogs.

## Snakebites in Western North Carolina

North Carolina has had the highest frequency of reported snakebites in the United States, around 19 per 100,000 people, though most snakebites go unreported. The majority of snakebites throughout the country occur during the summer months.

Even though snakes are not aggressive, it is still necessary to take some precaution while in the field, for a snake may bite if it feels trapped or surprised. However, copperheads will normally quickly crawl away rather than attempting to bite.

To best avoid getting bitten, stay on clearly marked trails and out of tall grass, and be careful when reaching into areas that you cannot see, such as behind a rock or under a log where a snake could be waiting for a mouse to come by.

Also, wear boots and thick socks while hiking. Most importantly, if you see a snake, leave it alone. It can only effectively strike within a distance of one-half the length of its body.

## Treatment

Snakes in Western North Carolina are generally not deadly unless the bite victim is a small child or is already very sick.

The region’s non-venomous snakes have many small teeth, so their bites will make superficial scratches in the shape of a horseshoe. This wound should be washed with soap and water and wiped with hydrogen peroxide.

If the snake is poisonous, it is most important to stay calm. Signs and symptoms usually appear within one hour of the bite and may include swelling and bruising around the bite, red skin with blisters, dark areas under the skin, nausea, vomiting, fever, headache, chills, sweating, and/or blurred vision.

Gomez described her hand after being bitten as swelling to “something un-human, like a blown-up latex glove.” The skin around her wound and up her arm turned from black to blue to green to red

throughout the course of her healing, during which she spent two days in the intensive care unit, where she was administered antivenin.

If you are bitten, be sure to remove rings and tight clothing near the bite, keeping the bite area still and below the level of your heart. If you are on the trail and need to seek medical care, walk, don't run, out of the field. You can create a "constriction band" with an elastic bandage or a piece of cloth, wrapping the area tightly just above the bite. However, ensure that you can get two fingers between the constriction band and your skin.

Other treatments, such as making an incision over the bite, mouth suctioning, tourniquets, ice packs, and electric shock may do more harm than good. Also, do not drink alcohol if you have been bitten.