

Hill Country Venomous Snakes: Feared, Maligned and Misunderstood

I don't think there is anything in the natural world that is feared, maligned or misunderstood more than snakes. I know there is nothing else about which there are so many myths that are so widely believed. Here are the facts about the Hill Country venomous snakes.

The best numbers I could find show that in a recent year there were about 7000 snake bites in the whole US. Of those, 4 people died. We don't know how many of those were bites from pets or snakes kept in zoos and the like, but it could be a lot. Also, there is no record of how many of the bites did not involve venom; approximately half of all snake bites do not have venom injected. So your odds of being bitten by a wild native venomous snake are clearly not zero, but they are very low. And your odds of dying from a snake bite are very nearly zero. You have lots more things to worry about.

Fifty percent of all snake bites are to 18-28 year-olds, 90% of those to males, nearly always to the hands or feet.

There are 105 species of snakes in Texas, of which 26 are common in the Edwards Plateau and another 16 are uncommon or rare. Of the snakes found in the Edwards Plateau, 3 common ones, the coral snake, the broad-banded copperhead and the western diamondback rattlesnake are venomous. The western cottonmouth, also venomous, is regarded as uncommon or rare. These four make up a very small percentage of Hill Country snakes.

In ten years of tromping around many miles of pasture on many different properties in the Hill Country, I have personally encountered only one venomous snake, a rattlesnake, not counting a visit to a friend's rattlesnake den in Lampasas Co. Rattlesnakes are certainly the most commonly encountered poisonous snake in this area, and I do have a friend who was bitten and know of several folks whose dogs have been bitten. Once you have heard the sound of a rattlesnake, you never forget it, but having missed stepping on one by about 4 inches out in Big Bend, I noted that it never rattled.

Copperheads are described as generally uncommon, but locally common. Where they occur, they can be common, but most of the Hill Country will not have any copperheads. Apparently, they do not range widely or scatter far from their birthplace. I read that there is no record of anyone ever dying from a copperhead bite.

Coral snakes have bands around their bodies in three colors, red, yellow and black, with the yellow bands between the black and red bands. They are small, non-aggressive

snakes with short fangs that cannot penetrate a leather shoe. Only about 1% of all snake bites are from coral snakes, and virtually all of them are from someone touching the snake. They tend to spend most of their time either in underground burrows or in thick leaf litter.

It is unlikely that you have never seen a water moccasin (cottonmouth) in the Hill Country. If they are in this area, they are very rare. Most people seem to assume that if they see a snake in the water it is a water moccasin, but in fact it is almost certainly either a blotched water snake or a diamondback water snake, both of which are common in this area and are totally harmless. When a moccasin swims, its whole body floats on the surface. Other snakes swim with their head out of the water but the rest of the body somewhat submerged. Nearly all snakes have white mouths, so that is no indication that it is a cottonmouth.

If you are bitten by a snake, first try not to panic. It may be painful, but it won't be fatal. Get to a hospital as soon as safely possible. Don't worry about catching or killing the snake. If it is a coral snake, you will have noticed the bright colors, if it is anything else, it doesn't matter what it was because the treatments are the same. DO NOT put on a tourniquet, DO NOT cut open the fang marks and suck out the blood, and do not put ice on the area. If possible, keep the bite area at the same level as your heart.

I will discuss the many non-venomous snakes in the Hill Country in a later column. Until next time...

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