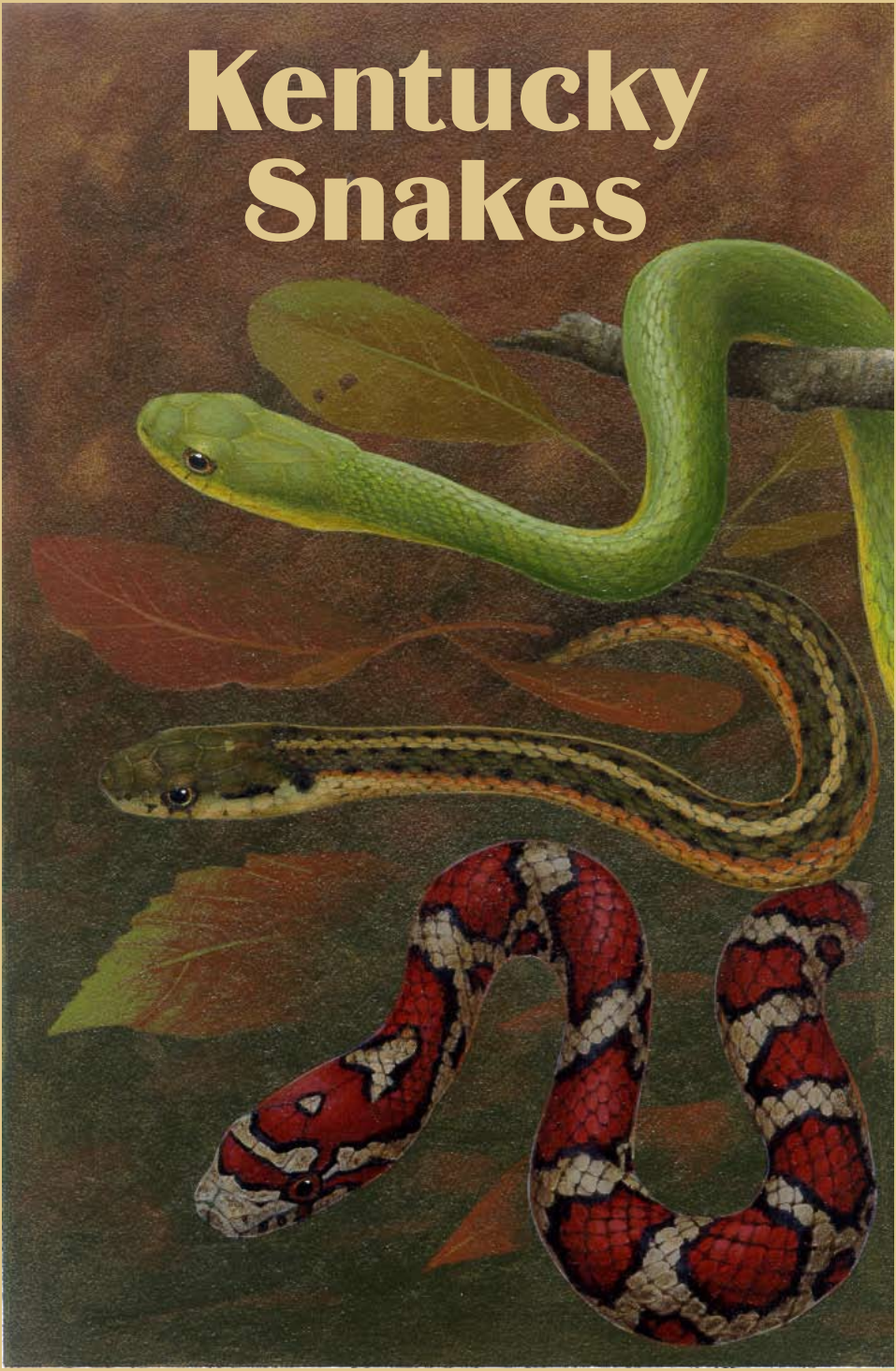
Kentucky Snakes



Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources

We are the stewards of Kentucky's fish and wildlife resources and their habitats. We manage for the perpetuation of these resources and their use by present and future generations. Through partnerships, we will enhance wildlife diversity and promote sustainable use, including hunting, fishing, boating and other nature related recreation.

Kentucky Snakes

C. Tom Bennett, Commissioner

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April 2002

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Preface

The purpose of this booklet is to assist in the identification of Kentucky's snakes. While some snakes can be easily identified with a quick comparison to a photograph, others can be a little more difficult. Therefore, in addition to photographs, this booklet contains brief written descriptions and range maps. The general range where each species is known to occur within the state is indicated by blue on these maps. If you discover a snake in the field, observe it from a safe distance. In addition to the snake's color and pattern, also pay attention to its behavior as this can sometimes provide clues to its identification. In those situations where a snake is discovered in a place where it may be a problem, this booklet contains some suggestions on ways to discourage its presence.

Acknowledgements

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We are also indebted to John MacGregor for graciously providing the photographs in this booklet. John MacGregor is the states leading herpetologist and a noted wildlife photographer. John has spent most of his life helping to understand and protect Kentucky's wildlife. His many talents and interest have greatly expanded our knowledge of snakes in Kentucky.

What is the Wildlife Diversity Program?

The Wildlife Diversity Program contributes to the department's mission by focusing on the conservation of those species, which are typically referred to as nongame species. Nongame species are those species that are not hunted or fished. We seek to accomplish this task through such activities as inventory, monitoring, research, and public education. This is a big task considering there are more than 242 species of fish, 105 species of mussels, 54 species of crayfish, 105 species of reptiles and amphibians, 350 species of birds, and 69 species of mammals known from Kentucky.

Kentucky Snakes

Introduction

Snakes are one of the most interesting groups of animals in Kentucky. They range in size from the tiny seven-inch worm snake to the impressive six foot black rat. Some like the slender green snake are masters of camouflage while others like the scarlet kingsnake display themselves with brilliant colors. Not only do snakes come in many sizes and colors but they are found in a variety of habitats. Snakes may be found anywhere in Kentucky from deep in the forest to your own backyard. Depending on the species of snake its diet may include insects, mice, toads, birds, and even other snakes.

Despite their bad reputation, snakes are very beneficial. They eat many of the slugs, insects, mice, and rats that we consider pests. In addition to their ecological value, snakes are widely used in medical research. Unfortunately, these things don't come to mind when most people encounter a snake. Many people fear and dislike snakes, often because they believe they are venomous. However, of the 32 types of snakes found in Kentucky, only 4 are venomous. Thus, most snakes encountered are quite harmless. With a little information, it is easy to distinguish a venomous snake from one of the many harmless snakes found in Kentucky.

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Identifying Kentucky's Venomous Species

Kentucky's venomous snakes are the copperhead, cottonmouth, timber rattlesnake, and pigmy rattlesnake. All four species belong to a group of snakes called pit vipers. The name pit viper comes from the pit or small opening located on each side of the head between the eye and nostril (Fig. 1). Pits are sensory organs that aid in the capture of warm-blooded prey. Another characteristic unique to venomous snakes is eyes with vertical pupils. Kentucky's harmless snakes all have round pupils (Fig. 2). On venomous snakes, scales underneath the tail will be in a single undivided row. The same scales on harmless snakes will be in two distinct rows (Fig. 3). Venomous snakes in Kentucky bear live young; therefore, any snake eggs encountered are from a harmless species.

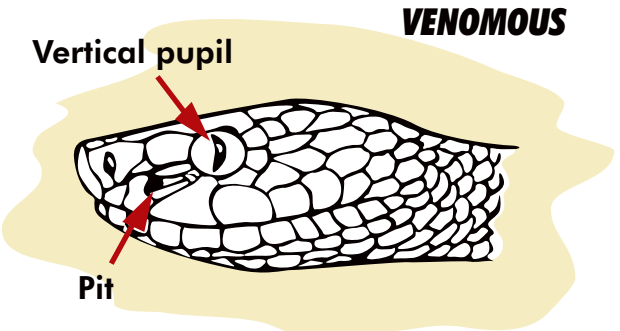


Figure 1

Other techniques such as head shape and tail vibrating are not as reliable in distinguishing between venomous and harmless snakes. It is true that all four of Kentucky's venomous species have triangular or spade shaped heads with the back of the head being wider than the neck. However, many harmless species will imitate this characteristic by flattening their heads when threatened, which makes the head appear much wider. Likewise, a sudden buzzing noise does not always indicate the presence of a rattlesnake. Rattlesnakes are not the only snakes that will vibrate their tails when alarmed. Many harmless snakes will rapidly vibrate their tails. When this is done in dry vegeta-

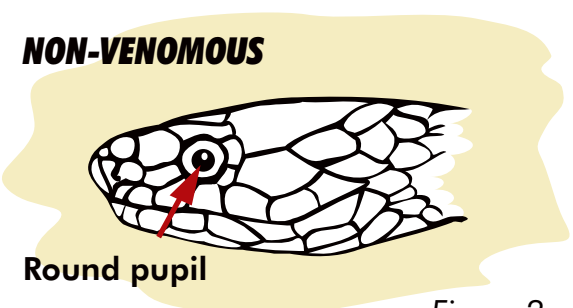


Figure 2

tion, it can produce a sound similar to a rattlesnake.

Although snakebites are rare, the majority of bites occur when someone tries to capture, kill, or otherwise harass a snake. The best advice is to leave the snake alone and enjoy watching it from a distance. Even if a venomous snake has been killed, you should not attempt to handle it. Due to reflex action, a snake can still deliver a venomous bite for a short period after it has been killed.

If you are one of the unlucky few to be bitten, most sources agree that the best first aid is a set of car keys to get the victim to professional medical care. Other first aid techniques that have been used for snakebite include tourniquets or constricting bands, venom extraction devices, cutting across the fang marks, and even electric shock. However, most experts believe these devices are not effective and in some cases may do more harm than good. The important thing is to remain calm. It is estimated that on average only 9 to 15 deaths occur in the U.S. each year from snakebites.

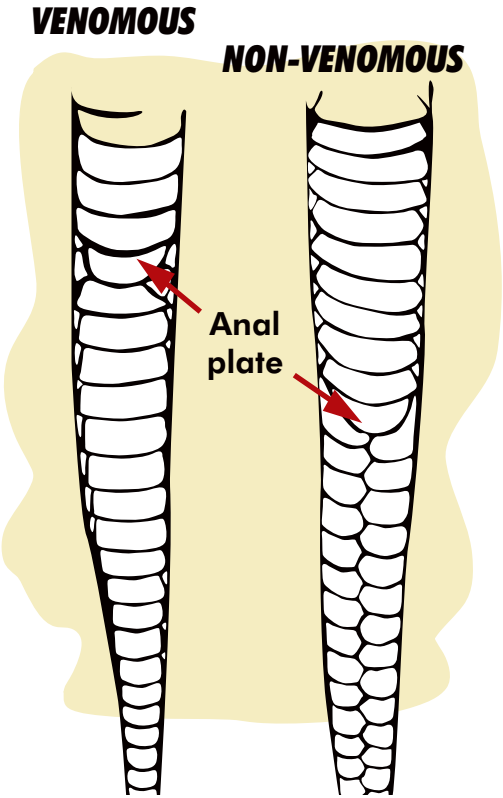


Figure 3

Snakes are reptiles. The scientific study of amphibians and reptiles is called herpetology.

Family: Viperidae (Venomous)

Copperhead

(*Agkistrodon contortrix*)
Average length 8 - 40”

A large number of harmless snakes are killed each year in the mistaken belief they are copperheads. In Kentucky, the copperhead can vary in general coloration from reddish brown (coppery-red) to brown, which is similar to several of the common harmless species. However, a good identifying characteristic for copperheads is the chestnut crossbands that are wide on the side of the body and narrower across the back. These bands are often described as having an hour glass or bow tie shape when viewed from above. Some of the bands may be “broken” or incomplete along the middle of the

Note the yellow tail tip on the juvenile copperhead.

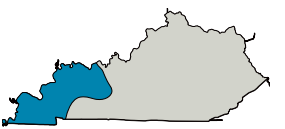
Note the facial pit that indicates that this is a venomous snake. Any snake with such a pit is venomous.

back and do not form a perfect hour glass shape. These partial or incomplete bands will still be wider on the sides of the body, narrowing in the middle of the back. Small dark spots are often present on the body between the crossbands. Young copperheads are similar to the adults with the exception of a yellow or greenish-yellow tail tip that they use as a lure to attract small frogs and insects within striking distance. This tail coloration will gradually disappear with age.

Adult copperheads prey on mice and other small mammals but will also take frogs, lizards, insects, and the occasional small bird. Copperheads mate in the spring and the young are born alive in late summer or early fall. Studies indicate that female copperheads only give birth every other year. It is believed that copperheads may live for up to 15 years in the wild. The copperhead is a common snake in many parts of the state.

Western Cottonmouth

(*Agkistrodon piscivorus leucostoma*)
Average length 8 - 46”



This is typically a dark heavy-bodied snake. However, young cottonmouths look similar to young copperheads with dark crossbands and yellowish tail tips, but this pattern rapidly fades with age.

The lack of obvious markings can make identification of adult cottonmouths difficult in the field, but behavior can offer some clues. On land, the harmless water snakes almost always drop into the water or flee quickly when approached. In contrast, cottonmouths often stand their ground in an open-mouthed threat display, revealing the whitish interior of the mouth, and often rapidly vibrate their tail. On the rare occasion when a harmless water

snake gapes, with mouth open wide, the interior of the mouth will be pinkish in color. Harmless water snakes do not vibrate their tail. Another interesting distinction is that cottonmouths have a scale above their eyes that sticks out slightly so that when viewing the snake's head from above or behind (such as when it swims by the boat), you cannot see the eyes. This may explain why cottonmouths almost always swim with their head held completely out of the water. In contrast, the harmless water snake's eyes can be seen from above, and they normally swim with their head right on the water's surface. Also pay attention to the range map. The cottonmouth has a limited distribution in Kentucky.

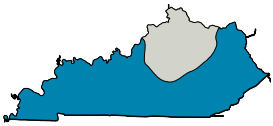
Juvenile cottonmouth

Cottonmouths are usually found in or around water, but they may be encountered in upland areas in the spring or fall as they move to or from their hibernating sites. Cottonmouths have a wide range of prey species including fish, frogs, other snakes, lizards, and rodents. Females give birth to live young in late summer or early fall.

Timber Rattlesnake

(*Crotalus horridus*)

Average length 8 - 60”



The timber rattlesnake is the state’s largest venomous snake. It is a heavy-bodied snake with dark, sometimes V-shaped cross-bands, on a yellow, gray, brown or sometimes greenish background color. The crossbands are always present except on completely black individuals, which occasionally occur.

An obvious characteristic for this and other rattlesnake species is the rattle on the tip of the tail. Timber rattlesnakes, however, typically do not rattle unless provoked. Other snakes including some harmless species will rapidly vibrate their tail when alarmed. If this is done in dry vegetation, it may sound similar to a rattle.

A forest animal, this species is found in the heavily wooded areas of Kentucky. They prefer south and southwest facing slopes with rocky outcrops and bluffs. Rodents make up the bulk of their

A common "urban legend" that periodically circulates throughout portions of the state is that fish and wildlife is stocking rattlesnakes. Some of the more colorful accounts include dropping them out of airplanes. However, the state has never stocked rattlesnakes in Kentucky.

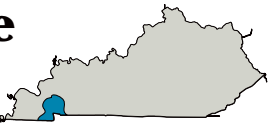
Rick Hill Illustrations

diet with squirrels being a major prey item. An ambush predator, a snake will position itself along a rodent trail and wait motionless for its prey to appear. Timber rattlesnakes are a secretive, nonaggressive species. Their main defense is to lie motionless on the forest floor, relying on their color and pattern to camouflage them from predators. Females are between four and six years old before they give birth. The young are born alive in late summer or early fall. A female gives birth every other year, although, in more northern states females may only give birth every third year. Timber rattlesnakes are long-lived animals and may survive for up to 25 years in the wild. Timber rattlesnakes are undergoing severe population declines throughout their range. Kentucky is one of the few states with a relatively healthy population.

Western Pigmy Rattlesnake

(*Sistrurus miliarius steckeri*)

Average length 5 - 20”



This snake is a light, grayish brown with dark spots or short bars on its back and sometimes sides. A faint reddish brown or “rusty” stripe may be present down its back. It has a skinny tail and very small rattle that can be hard to hear; and has been compared to the sound of an insect buzzing. Like copperheads and cottonmouths the very young have a yellow tail tip.

The pigmy rattlesnake has a very limited range in Kentucky where it is only known to occur in Calloway, Lyon, and Trigg Counties. Very little is known about the species habits within the state. However, in other portions of its range, it is typically found near water where it feeds on mice, lizards, small snakes, and frogs.

Rattlesnakes add a rattle every time they shed their skin, which may be as often as five times a year. In addition rattles may sometimes break off. Thus, counting the rattles is not a reliable way to age a rattlesnake.

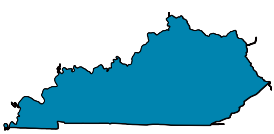
Family: Colubridae (Non-venomous)

Young Black Rat Snakes

Black Rat Snake

(*Elaphe o. obsoleta*)
Average length 9 - 72"

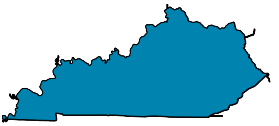
The black rat is one of Kentucky's largest snakes. A large shiny brown to black (sometimes grayish) snake with occasional cream or yellowish coloring "between" its scales. These light areas are most visible when the snake is extended. The belly coloration is light, usually with some indications of black and white checkering. The young are grayish with darker blotches (saddles) down the back clearly extending onto the tail. Rat snakes are good climbers and can often be seen on tree limbs or barn rafters. It is a beneficial species to have around the barnyard where it will feed on mice and rats, which it kills by constriction.



Black Racer

(*Coluber c. constrictor*)

Average length 8 - 60”

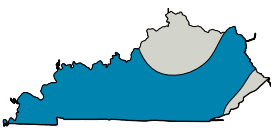


This is a long, slender, black (sometimes bluish-gray) snake with a white chin. The belly is uniformly gray to black. The young look much different appearing grayish with dark blotches down the back. These blotches are less distinct or more likely absent from the tail. As their name implies, racers are usually quick to flee at the first hint of danger, and like the rat snake, they are good climbers. However, if cornered, a racer may rapidly vibrate its tail and strike aggressively.

Unlike many other snakes, racers actively hunt during daylight hours. Contrary to its scientific name, the racer is not a constrictor. Instead, it grabs its prey and quickly pins it to the ground until it stops struggling.

Black Kingsnake

(*Lampropeltis getula nigra*)
Average length 9 - 45"

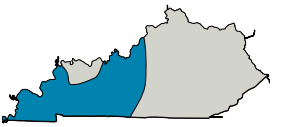


A black snake with small white or yellow spots that are typically concentrated on the head and sides of the body. On young snakes, these spots "connect" forming a chain like pattern down the back. Occasionally, this pattern is faintly visible on adults. The belly is black and white checkered. Kingsnakes truly are king among snakes in that a common food item is other snakes, including venomous ones. Kingsnakes are apparently immune to the venom of Kentucky's pit vipers.

Some people believe the bite of a "black snake" will make you sick. As with any scrape, there is always the chance for an infection. However, a bite from a black snake or any other non-venomous snake in and of itself will not make a person sick.

Prairie Kingsnake

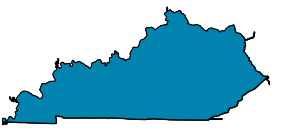
(*Lampropeltis c. calligaster*)
Average length 9 - 42”



A tan to brownish-gray snake with large darker blotches (saddles) down its back. These blotches usually have a black border. A row of smaller alternating blotches are typically present down each side of the body. It has a brown (yellowish) checkered belly. As its name implies, this species can be found in and around grassland areas and open woods where it feeds on rodents, birds, and other reptiles.

Milk Snake

(*Lampropeltis triangulum*)
Average length 6 - 36”

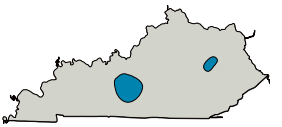


This is a light gray to brown snake with brown or red black-edged blotches (saddles) down its back. Occasionally, a row of smaller blotches will be present down each side of the body. The belly is checkered with black on white. This snake’s common name comes

from the myth that it will suck milk from cows. However, milk snakes are incapable of achieving such a feat. Its occasional presence in barns is more likely due to an abundance of mice, which is its primary prey item.

Corn Snake

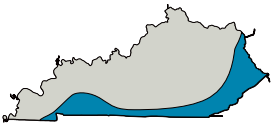
(*Elaphe g. guttata*)
Average length 6 - 48"



This snake can vary from orange to brown or gray. Orange or reddish blotches with black borders occur down the back. The belly is black and white checkered with black and white stripes under the tail. Sometimes called the "red rat snake", the corn snake is a good climber but it also spends time underground searching for rodents. This species has limited distribution in Kentucky occurring in two widely disjunct (separated) populations.

Scarlet Kingsnake

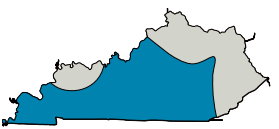
(*Lampropeltis triangulum elapsoides*)
Average length 5 - 24”



The scarlet kingsnake is a beautiful snake with red, yellow, and black rings. These rings enter upon the belly and sometimes completely encircle the body. Unlike the venomous coral snake, which does not occur in Kentucky, the kingsnake’s red and yellow rings are always separated by black on the kingsnake. This species of kingsnake is uncommon in Kentucky.

Scarlet Snake

(*Cemophora coccinea*)
Average length 5 - 20”

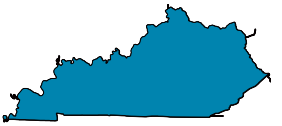


A colorful little snake with red and yellow bands down the back separated by black. Unlike the scarlet kingsnake, the scarlet snake has a plain white belly. This species is uncommon in Kentucky.

Eastern Hognose Snake

(*Heterodon platirhinos*)

Average length 5 - 36”

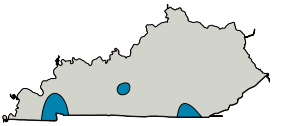


The overall coloration of this snake varies from yellowish or greenish with dark blotches down its back, or it can be all black. As its name suggests, it has a unique upturned snout (like a pig). Its behavior is also a good identifying characteristic. When feeling threatened, it will flatten its head and neck and hiss loudly. If that doesn’t work, it may roll over and play dead. Its behavior has earned it some colorful names including puff adder and blow viper.

This snake’s scientific name Heterodon means different tooth, referring to enlarged teeth found in the back of the snake’s mouth. A favorite food item of hognose snakes is toads, which commonly puff themselves up with air making them appear too large to swallow. However, hognose snakes get around this tactic by using their specialized teeth to pop the air out of toads just like a balloon.

Northern Pine Snake

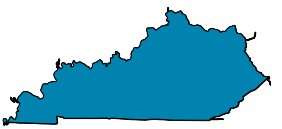
(*Pituophis m. melanoleucus*)
Average length 12 - 72”



A large black and white snake with a noisy hiss. The belly is white. Although, this is one of our largest snakes, its habit of burrowing underground makes it extremely difficult to find. As its name implies, the northern pine snake is often associated with pinewoods, but it can be found in other upland forest habitats with sandy/loose soils. It is considered uncommon in Kentucky.

Eastern Garter Snake

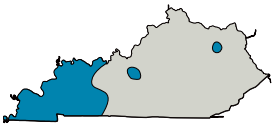
(*Thamnophis s. sirtalis*)
Average length 5 - 26”



Normally, a relatively small snake with three yellow stripes down its back, but the stripes can vary in color. Occasionally, the stripes may be virtually absent and replaced with dark spots occurring more or less in rows down the back. The belly is greenish or yellow, often with two rows of dark spots. This is a common species in Kentucky that can be found in urban areas. Although harmless, it may sometimes bite if picked up and/or release a smelly musk that some people may find offensive.

Eastern Ribbon Snake

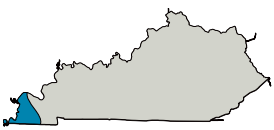
(*Thamnophis s. sauritus*)
Average length 7 - 28”



This animal is a very slim, ribbon like snake with an exceptionally long tail. Three yellow or orange stripes extend down the length of the body. Ribbon snakes are found along the edges of streams and swamps where they hunt for frogs and salamanders.

Western Ribbon Snake

(*Thamnophis p. proximus*)
Average length 9 - 30”



The western ribbon snake is similar to the eastern ribbon snake in appearance and habitat. Like the Broad-banded and the Green Water Snakes it is restricted to the extreme western edge of Kentucky.

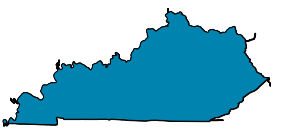
The outstanding scientific discovery of the twentieth century is not television, or radio, but rather the complexity of the land organism. Only those who know the most about it can appreciate how little we know about it. The last word in ignorance is the man who says of an animal or plant: "What good is it?" If the land mechanism as a whole is good, then every part is good, whether we understand it or not. If the biota, in the course of aeons, has built something we like but do not understand, then who but a fool would discard seemingly useless parts? To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering.

- Aldo Leopold

Rough Green Snake

(*Opheodrys aestivus*)

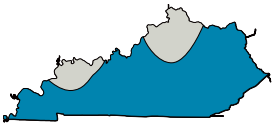
Average length 6 - 32"



Perhaps the easiest snake in Kentucky to identify, it is a slender, unmarked green snake with a white belly. Recently killed individuals may appear blue. Usually found in trees or bushes this snake feeds on spiders and insects. It will sometimes bend and wave to imitate a branch moving in the wind.

Northern Redbelly Snake

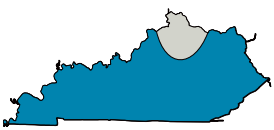
(*Storeria o. occipitomaculata*)
Average length 3 - 15”



This is a small brownish snake with a bright red or orange belly. Narrow longitudinal stripes are sometimes present down the back. Light spots are usually present on the neck. There is typically a small white spot below the eye.

Worm Snake

(*Carphophis amoenus*)
Average length 3 - 12”

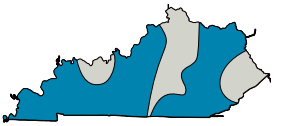


A small, plain brown snake with a pinkish-red belly. Belly coloration extends slightly onto the lower sides of the body. Note a “spiny” point on the tip of the tail. Like many of the small snakes found within the state, the worm snake is easily overlooked. However, it can occasionally be found under logs or rocks in forested areas. Its diet includes earthworms and other soft-

Smooth Earth Snake

(*Virginia valeriae*)

Average length 3 - 10”

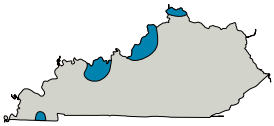


This is a small, brown to gray snake. It is usually unmarked but there may be a faint, light line down the middle of the back. The belly is yellowish to white in color. The smooth earth snake is a secretive snake that is most commonly found after heavy rains. At other times, it may be found under rocks, logs, or other debris where it feeds on earthworms, slugs, and other soft-bodied items.

All snakes are carnivorous meaning they eat other animals. Some snakes are capable of swallowing prey that is up to three times the diameter of their head.

Kirtland's Snake

(*Clonophis kirtlandii*)
Average length 4 - 18"



Kirtland's snake has a reddish belly and a row of dark spots down each side. While Kirtland's Snake is often found in wet meadows and swamps it may also be found on lightly wooded hillsides.

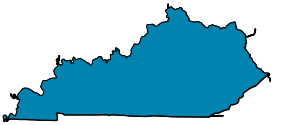
Brown Snake

(*Storeria dekayi*)
Average length 3 - 14"

Small brown snakes with a double row of dark spots down the back. The belly is lighter in color than the back. There is a dark, downward streak on the side of the head behind the eye. Young brown snakes possess a yellowish collar that superficially resembles a ring neck snake.

Ringneck Snake

(*Diadophis punctatus*)
Average length 5 - 15”

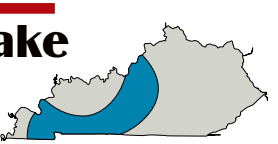


A small, gray to black snake with a yellow neck ring. Belly is yellow, occasionally with one or two rows of black dots down the middle. When held, this snake will not bite; however, it will often

release a smelly musk. The ringneck can be found under rocks, logs, within garbage piles, etc. where it feeds on worms, slugs, small reptiles, and amphibians. Interestingly, several female ringneck snakes may lay their eggs in a single communal nest.

Southeastern Crowned Snake

(*Tantilla coronata*)
Average length 3-10”

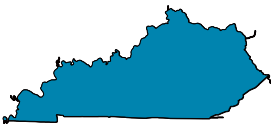


Small, secretive snakes with black heads and a tan or brown bodies. A light colored band extends across the rear of the head.

The belly is white or pink. Crowned snakes are most active at night. They feed on spiders, earthworms, and insect larvae. Females lay 1 to 3 eggs. This snake may be found in a variety of habitats that range from wet areas to dry wooded hillside.

Northern Water Snake

(*Nerodia s. sipedon*)
Average length 7 - 42"

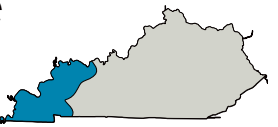


Superficially resembling a copperhead, this variable snake can be reddish, brownish, or light gray. Dark crossbands are nearly always present but are harder to see in adults that sometimes darken with age resulting in a plain dark brown or even black snake. When present, the crossbands will be as wide or wider on the middle of the back, unlike the hourglass shape present on the copperhead.

These aquatic snakes nearly always make a hasty retreat into water when approached. The northern water snake or its subspecies the Midland Water Snake (*Nerodia sipedon pleuralis*) is found in nearly every body of water in Kentucky. See the cottonmouth description for more behavioral cues on how to tell this and other harmless water snakes from the venomous cottonmouth.

Diamondback Water Snake

(*Nerodia r. rhombifer*)
Average length 8 - 48"

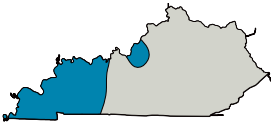


A big, thick-bodied, brownish-yellow to greenish snake that is covered by a dark chain-like pattern on back and sides. The chin and belly are pale yellow with dark spots or half moons on the belly. Male diamondback water snakes are unique in our area in that several raised papillae or bumps cover their chin. However, you probably wouldn't want to tickle its chin as it, like other water snakes, has a reputation as being a fierce fighter when handled. See the cottonmouth description for some behavioral cues on how to tell this and other harmless water snakes from the venomous cottonmouth.

Copperbelly Water Snake

(*Nerodia erythrogaster neglecta*)

Average length 8 - 48”



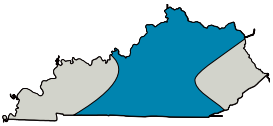
The copperbelly water snake is a subspecies of the plainbelly water snake. It has a dark black back and a surprising, bright orange-red belly. Young are boldly patterned with large dark blotches down the back and smaller alternating blotches on sides, all on a “pinkish” ground color. The yellowbelly water snake (*Nerodia erythrogaster flavigaster*) is also found in Kentucky. The yellowbelly is similar in appearance to the copperbelly but it has a gray or greenish-gray back and a yellow belly. See the cottonmouth description for some behavioral cues on how to tell this and other harmless water snakes from the venomous cottonmouth.

A snake of swamps, sloughs, and bottomland hardwood forests. Populations of the copperbelly water snake have declined dramatically as the wetlands where they live have been drained or altered. Copperbelly Water Snakes are a protected species in Kentucky and may not be killed or collected. Copper-bellies feed primarily on frogs, salamanders, and tadpoles. Females give live birth to the young in the fall.

The southern populations of the copperbelly water snake are protected by Habitat Conservation Agreements. Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois have entered into these agreements to help protect the snakes remaining habitat. The agreements have also prevented the need to add the copperbelly to the federal list of threatened and endangered species.

Queen Snake

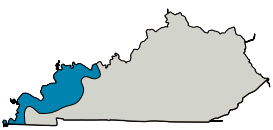
(*Regina septemvittata*)
Average length 6 - 24”



This is a brown, unmarked snake except for a yellowish stripe on the lower sides of the body. The belly is pale yellowish with four dark stripes. This snake is most commonly associated with small streams where it primarily feeds on crayfish and other aquatic invertebrates. Queen snakes are harmless, but they emit a foul smelling musk when handled.

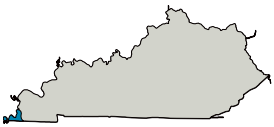
Western Mud Snake

(*Farancia abacura reinwardtii*)
Average length 6 - 54”



A shiny black snake with a red belly. The belly color extends noticeably up onto the sides. This snake is sometimes referred to as the horned snake due to it pointed tail tip, but it is quite harmless. It is found in the swamps and sloughs of western Kentucky where it feeds on salamanders.

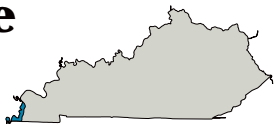
Mississippi Green Water Snake



(*Nerodia cyclopion*)
Average length 8 - 45”

An undistinguished snake, the green water snake can be difficult to identify without first capturing the animal. The green water snake has a row of scales between the lip and the eye scales that allows for positive identification. This snake is found in extreme western Kentucky.

Broad-Banded Water Snake



(*Nerodia fasciata confluens*)
Average length 7 - 36”

This snake is distinguished from other water snakes by its broad, dark, bands. The Broad-Banded Water Snake is found only at the extreme western edge of Kentucky.

Dealing with Snakes in Unwanted Places

While snakes are an important part of the environment, there are situations where a person may want to discourage their presence. Although some chemical agents like naphthalene (mothballs) and cayenne pepper have been proposed as potential deterrents, their effectiveness is questionable. The best way of discouraging snakes is to make an area less appealing to them by removing shelter and food sources.

Although there is no way to guarantee that you will never find a snake in your yard, there are ways to make your home and yard less attractive to snakes. Snakes are attracted to piles of wood, tin, rock, and other debris. Such piles not only provide shelter for snakes, but also rodents and other prey species. It is also a good idea to keep your grass cut short. Another recommendation is to stack firewood on a rack, away from the house, and to elevate the stack off the ground.

Occasionally snakes get into basements, crawl spaces under homes, and/or in outbuildings. While few people may actually see snakes in their basement, it is not unusual to find shed skins in these or other places. If you find a fairly intact skin, it is easy to tell if it came from one of Kentucky's venomous species. Take a look at the underside of the tail behind the anal plate. If the scales directly behind the anal plate are divided into two rows, you can be assured the skin came from a harmless species. If these scales are in a single row, caution should be taken if searching for the offending animal (*Page 6, Fig 3*).

To keep snakes from entering unwanted places look around the exterior (or interior) for any openings of 1/4" or more. These openings can be filled with mortar, 1/8" hardware cloth, or caulk around windows, wiring, etc.

For a list of the snakes and other wildlife species likely to occur in Kentucky you can visit the Kentucky Fish and Wildlife Information System, which is maintained by the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources at *http://www.fw.ky.gov/*. This site is being updated regularly.

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