



copperhead

Agkistrodon contortrix

Kingdom: Animalia
Division/Phylum: Chordata - vertebrates
Class: Reptilia
Order: Squamata
Family: Viperidae

Features

Iowa's rarest snake, the copperhead, ranges from 24 to 36 inches long. It has a heat-sensitive pit on each side of the head between the eye and the nostril. The head is flattened and much wider than the neck. The pupil of its eye is vertically elliptical (like cat eyes). Its scales are weakly keeled (ridged). This snake has a copper-colored head and red-brown or yellowish-brown body with hour-glass markings across the back when viewed from above.

Natural History

The copperhead lives in rocky, wooded hillsides, particularly near streams and ponds. This venomous snake injects venom into its prey, then waits for it to succumb before eating it. It eats mice, small birds, lizards, snakes, amphibians, and insects. It is active during the day in spring and fall, becoming nocturnal in the hottest summer months. It will attempt to escape when disturbed and it rapidly vibrates the tip of its tail (making a noise against whatever the tail hits) when trapped. This snake may be found in groups, particularly in fall when moving to hibernating dens. Mating occurs in the spring. The female gives birth to a brood of one to 14

young in August or September. Each female may produce young only every other year.

Habitats

bottomland forests; Mississippi River; interior rivers and streams

Iowa Status

endangered; native

We are located along the northern extreme of the copperhead's range. They likely were more abundant in the southern tier of counties before settlement.

Iowa Range

southeast corner of Iowa

Bibliography

Iowa Department of Natural Resources. 2001. *Biodiversity of Iowa: Aquatic Habitats* CD-ROM.