

Common Snakes of the Barataria Preserve

“If you don't bother the snake, the snake won't bother you;” is an old saying, but is quite true. Taking some simple precautions in the Preserve will minimize problems and enable you to safely enjoy the Preserve's trails. Wear proper footwear, remain on marked trails, and above all, look before you sit, step or reach.

All snakes are protected. It is unlawful to handle or molest snakes in the Preserve. Snakes should not be captured: they are relatively delicate and internal injuries can result from improper handling. Besides, most bites occur during capture and handling.

Twenty-two species of snakes have been seen in the Preserve. Of these, only two species are venomous. Most of the snakes you see along the trails will be one of the twenty species of harmless, non-venomous snakes. Of these, four species of water snakes, the Ribbon Snake and the Black-Masked Racer are by far the most commonly encountered snakes in the Park.

Non-Venomous Snakes

Black-Masked Racer

Coluber constrictor lantrunculus

A long, glossy snake with a uniformly black to gray body up to 75 inches in length; belly bluish gray, black stripe behind the eye. young individuals have a series of dark mid-body blotches on a gray body. Found in bottomland hardwoods and cypress swamps. They are largely confined to areas of high ground.

Texas Rat Snake

Elaphe obsoleta linsheimeri

A very long snake (up to 101 inches) characterized by dark blotches on a gray-brown or yellowish brown background. Belly mottled or checkered. Most often they are found in briar patches, wooded areas, and around buildings. When cornered rat snakes often pull their body in a tight coil and rapidly vibrate their tails. They have been known to cause undue concern to humans viewing their performance.

Mud Snake

Farancia abacura reinwardti

A very long (up to 81 inches) glossy black snake; belly bright red, the color extending onto the lower sides of the body as irregular bars. The Mud Snake is one of the thoroughly aquatic snakes in the area, rarely seen out of water. During spring flooding, Mud Snakes may be commonly encountered on trails or sitting on branches at the water's surface. Adults feed almost exclusively on the Amphiuma and sirens, large eel-like salamanders.

Speckled Kingsnake

Lampropeltis getulus holbrooki

A long shiny, black snake (up to 82 inches) with a pattern of small, light-colored spots, some spots fuse to form narrow crossbands, a characteristic of all juveniles. Belly usually light with black markings. King snakes occur in most types of habitat, although they are most abundant in moist areas. Kingsnakes are one of the only snakes that kill and eat poison snakes.

Broad-banded Water Snake***Nerodia fuscata***

A moderately long, (up to 62 inches) heavy-bodied snake with broad dark bands on a brown or tan body. Belly light with large squarish dark blotches. It occurs in all aquatic situations, except salt marsh. They feed mainly on fish.

Ribbon Snake***Thamnophis proximus orarius***

A moderately long, slender, olive brown to black snake (up to 48 inches) with a gold vertebral stripe and a yellowish lateral stripe. Semiaquatic and remaining close to water sources. Very similar to Eastern Garter Snake but are distinguished by the position of the light lateral stripe.

Western Green Water Snake***Nerodia cyclopion***

A moderately long (up to 50 inches), heavy-bodied olive brown snake with a distinct pattern of narrow dark crossbands, the ones on the back alternating with those on the sides; belly dark brown marked with light spots or crescents. One of the most aquatic of the Water Snakes, is seldom, if ever, found away from the immediate vicinity of water. It prefers still or very slow moving water.

Louisiana Milksnake***Lampropeltis triangulum***

A moderately short to medium-sized (up to 52 inches) snake with a series of black-bordered red bands or rings on a yellow or white background; belly patterned same, or the rings may be incomplete. Characterized by a predominately black snout, and usually two anterior temporal on either side of the head. Primarily inhabitants of bottomland hardwood forest, where during winter and early spring, they are often, found some distance above the ground beneath the bark of dead trees or in the heart of rotten trees.

Venomous Snakes

Cottonmouth***Gkistrodon piscivorus leucostoma***

This is the most frequently encountered venomous snake in the preserve. Young cottonmouths are brown to reddish brown with a pattern of crossbands along the back, and grow up to 74 inches in length. The tip of the tail is sulfur-yellow. With age, the yellow disappears, and darkening obscures the bands. Adults show almost no color or pattern. In a few individuals, the dark patch extending from the eye to the angle of the jaw, partially outlined by white stripes, is striking. Cottonmouths are found with the abundant water snakes, and are often difficult to tell apart. Concentrate on head shape - not only is the head of a Cottonmouth spade-shaped, it is also quite flat on top, so flat as to form a pronounced brow-line. When frightened, Cottonmouths maneuver into a tight coil, or simply pull back into a striking position, throw it's head back, and open it's mouth, revealing it's fangs and cottony-white mouth. Give a snake in this posture a wide berth!

Copperhead***Agkistrodon contortrix contortrix***

Copperheads are the drier ground counterpart to the Cottonmouth A moderately long (up to 53 inches), heavy bodied, tan or copper-colored head. This color extends throughout the body, interrupted by a pattern of broad reddish crossbands. The color pattern provides excellent camouflage in the species preferred habitat, the leaf-covered forest floor. Young Copperheads share the sulfur-yellow tail tip of the Cottonmouth. Copperheads are secretive and retiring. Largely nocturnal, they are fairly common along trails on the natural levee, but even in daylight are often overlooked as they remain still when approached.