

The shy, secretive and colorful coral snake
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First, there is little pain and swelling. In about 12 hours disruption of the connections between the brain and the muscles begins. Slurred speech, double vision and muscular paralysis will eventually end in respiratory or cardiac failure. Does this sound like a scene from a horror movie? Actually these results are produced from something very tiny, secretive, shy and beautiful. If untreated by antivenin, the neurotoxin from the Eastern coral snake can cause these symptoms.

The good news is that coral snakes are recluses and not at all aggressive. They only bite when handled or stepped on. Unlike the rattlesnake that can strike from far away distances, the coral snake must chew on its victim to inject its venom. As a result, very few humans die from the bite of this beautiful creature. As a matter of fact, no deaths have been reported as a result of coral snakes since antivenin was released in 1967.

Coral snakes are somewhat unusual as far as venomous snakes go because their appearance does not resemble the more obvious features of pit vipers, which are generally associated with venom. Coral snakes are Elapids and are relatives of the cobra, mamba and sea snake.

They prefer wooded, sandy and marshy areas and spend most of their lives underground or in leaf litter. When confronted by humans, coral snakes will attempt to flee and will bite only to protect themselves. They have very short fangs that cannot usually penetrate thick leather, so when gardening gloves may be advisable. When disturbed, the snake will often lay its head out of sight and rattle its flattened elevated tail to warn off the invader.

Unfortunately, the very beauty of the reptile is what makes it so dangerous to humans. Children may see the bright yellow, red and black coloration and want to pick the creature up or touch it. The normally docile snake suddenly becomes a danger to the innocent victims. Fortunately, the snake is seldom seen by humans and tends to be nocturnal.

The colorful creatures eat lizards, frogs and smaller snakes including their own kind. When in search for prey, the unsuspecting lizard or other creature will stick its head in the leaf litter and may be met by a pair of fangs. The coral snake's venom is injected using a small pair of fixed, hollow fangs on the anterior of its mouth. The snake will chew on its victim, passing the venom into its body. The snake must hold onto the prey for a period of time in an effort to inject enough venom to incapacitate it.

The coral snake lays a clutch of two to three eggs in the summer months. It is the only poisonous snake in North America to lay eggs; pit vipers have live young. Baby coral snakes are about seven inches when they hatch from their eggs. The juveniles are born with full venom. The adults may reach two feet in length.

Although often confused with the Scarlet King snake, there are very easy ways to tell the difference between the two species. The Eastern Coral snake is characterized by red and yellow

rings which touch and encircle the entire body. The end of the nose is always black, in contrast to the scarlet king snake. Male coral snakes have 10 – 27 black bands while females have 12 – 26. The yellow rings on both sides of every red ring are found on the venomous snakes. “Red touch yellow, kill a fellow.”

In contrast, the harmless Scarlet King snake, which is a type of milk snake, will always have a red nose. The red and yellow rings are separated by black rings. These non-venomous reptiles have rings that do not completely encircle its body. The belly is white and the nose is pointed and red, not black. The red areas are ringed in black. “Red touch black, friend of Jack.”

Snakes have a bad reputation. Being a venomous snake is most likely a death sentence to any of these creatures that come in contact with most humans. But, as with all living things, everything has a purpose and a place in nature. Venomous snakes, such as the coral snake, offer uses in medical research and have benefited many people with differing research and medicines. Treatment of blood and heart problems and control of harmful bacteria in humans has also been a positive result of snake venom. In addition, these snakes help control the pest population and increase the wildlife diversity in the plant communities they live in.

A little education on your part will help you to appreciate these fascinating reptiles. Remember, these snakes are very shy and don't want to be disturbed. If you see one, just respect its space and back away. Unless you foolishly try to handle the creature, chances are you won't ever experience its bite, but you will be amazed at how colorful and beautiful they are.