Venomous Snakes

copperhead (*Agkistrodon contortrix*)

cottonmouth (*Agkistrodon piscivorus*)

timber rattlesnake (*Crotalus horridus*)

eastern massasauga (*Sistrurus catenatus*)

Is it poisonous or venomous? There is a difference.

A poisonous plant or animal causes harm if touched or consumed. Venomous organisms inject a toxin to subdue their prey, as is done by the hollow fangs of the four species of pit vipers found in Illinois—copperhead (*Agkistrodon contortrix*), cottonmouth (*Agkistrodon piscivorus*), timber rattlesnake (*Crotalus horridus*) and eastern massasauga (*Sistrurus catenatus*). The pit is a large opening between the eye and nostril used to detect heat emitted by their prey. Venomous snakes in Illinois also have an elliptical pupil.

Venomous snakes are not aggressive and tend to bite people only when stepped on, picked up or cornered. Learn to identify, and avoid these snakes when possible.

Copperheads have a light tan or rusty ground color and 10-20 darker brown, hourglass-shaped crossbands that are narrow on the back and widen on the sides. Locally abundant in wooded, rocky hillsides in the southern one-third of Illinois, south of Route 16, and in the lower Illinois River valley, copperheads prefer upland forests or bluffs with limestone or sandstone outcroppings.

The stout-bodied **cottonmouth** is relatively abundant in swamps, sloughs and wet bottomlands in extreme southern Illinois, south of Illinois Route 13. Young snakes have 12-18 dark crossbands on a brown or dark-brown back, and a wide, dark stripe from the nose through the eye and upper lip. Older adults are dark olive or black. When threatened, cottonmouths open their mouth, displaying a whitish lining.

Found in heavily timbered areas with river bluffs and rock outcrops in the southern one-fourth of the state, the lower Illinois and Mississippi river valleys and a few other locations is the **timber rattlesnake**. These stout-bodied snakes are gray to light yellow to greenish-white, with 20-25 black, jagged bands, and sometimes a rusty stripe down the back. A dark stripe is behind each eye. Timber rattlesnakes are listed as threatened in Illinois.

Prairie wetlands, wet oldfields and river floodplains in Madison, Clinton, Piatt, Knox, Warren, Will, Cook and Lake counties provide habitat for the state-endangered **Eastern massasauga**. The smallest venomous snake in Illinois, massasaugas are light brown to gray and have 29-40 light-edged brown or black spots down their back and three rows of smaller blotches along each side. A small rattle is at the end of the tail.