

# SNAKE ID AT A GLANCE

rev. 9/13/12

This flyer focuses only on northern snake species commonly confused with NJ's 2 venomous snakes.

**Note: Coloration can vary greatly among our snakes. It is best to focus on the pattern for identification.**

## VENOMOUS SNAKES

### 1) Timber Rattlesnake (State Endangered):

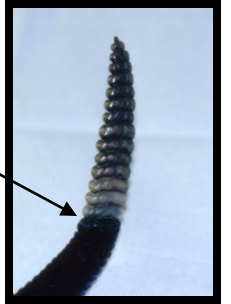


Examples of "yellow" or "light" phase

Examples of "black" or "dark" phase

#### Identifying a Timber Rattlesnake

- 1) The pattern: Regardless of color, the Timber Rattlesnake has a unique pattern (the darker color). It is often in the shape of irregular blotches along the neck nearest the head and becomes thick, jagged, lateral bands across the sides and back. These bands are occasionally "broken" (i.e., not extending completely across) but overall, you can see thick, jagged bands remain.
- 2) The tail: The last few inches of an adult rattlesnake (or the last 1-2" of young snakes) will be a solid black; the pattern does not continue to the end. In addition, the Timber Rattlesnake tail comes to a blunt end where it meets the rattle; it does not come to a fine point.
- 3) The rattle: Rattlesnakes are the only species that have this unique warning device...a warning that they are present and not to step on them. The length of a rattle can vary and can even be broken off entirely. However, the creamy to light beige color next to the black tail is obvious and when missing, the tail will appear to have a blunt rather than pointed end. It is important to note that many of our non-venomous snakes will shake their tails banging leaves, grasses, twigs, etc. to mimic the rattling noise.



### 2) Northern Copperheads (Special Concern):



#### Identifying a Northern Copperhead

The pattern is the BEST method of identifying a copperhead, NOT the color since Northern Water Snakes and Eastern Milksnakes have color variation as well! N. Copperheads have a very unique hourglass-shaped pattern (the darker color); wide on the sides and narrow across the back. No other snake species in NJ has this pattern. Some segments of the pattern may be "broken" presenting a 1/2 hourglass shape, but overall there will be complete lateral bands that are hourglass shaped and can be used for identification

#### Quick Safety Tips

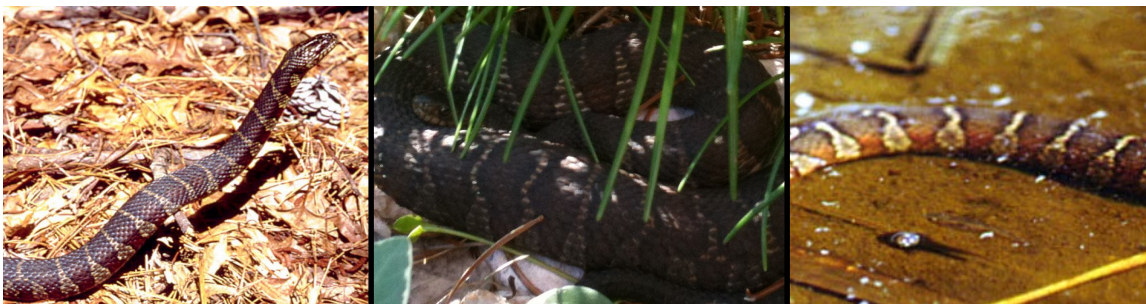
- Do not approach a venomous snake.
- NEVER attempt to handle a venomous snake!
- Stay on trails! When walking at night, wear leather shoes or boots & use a flashlight.
- Keep your pets on a leash!!

## Non-venomous Snakes Commonly Mistaken for Rattlesnakes or Copperheads



#### **Eastern Milksnake**

- Pattern (the darker color) consists of irregular shaped blotches along the length of the body.
- A light-colored irregular shaped "Y" or "V" can be found on the back of the head.



#### **Northern Water Snake**

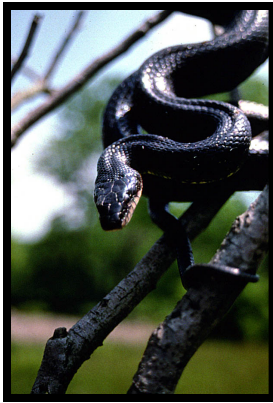
- Pattern (the darker color) is sort of a "reverse hourglass"; wider across the back, more narrow on the sides. A small dark blotch is often along the sides of the snake within the lighter color.
- As water snakes grow and age, they can appear to be a solid dark color ranging from brown to black to deep reddish-purple.



#### **Eastern Hognose**

- Patterned snakes have a somewhat uniform rectangular shaped pattern (the darker color). Hognose can also be a solid black.
- Uprturned snout.
- Will often play dead when feeling threatened; rolling over, emitting foul smell.

## Non-venomous Snakes Commonly Mistaken for Rattlesnakes or Copperheads



### **Black Rat Snake**

- Black rat snakes and black racers are not fully black until they are about 4 years old. As young, they are highly patterned, as juveniles there isn't a distinct pattern but rather a mix of black, gray & white. Racers have some white on the chin while black rats have white throats and traces of white throughout.
- Tails: Unlike rattlesnakes, the rat and racer tails come to a fine point.
- Black rats have weakly keeled scales while racers have smooth scales.
- NOTE: While completely black rattlesnakes exist in PA and NY, they are extremely rare in NJ. Only 1 has every been documented; it was in the Pinelands (mid-1980's).



### **Eastern Garter Snake**

- Single light-colored stripe extending from head to tail; often a checkered-board pattern is visible, prominent on some individuals and slightly muted on others.



**Black Rat Snake (sub-adult)**

### **Northern Black Racer**



### **Eastern Ribbon Snake**

- Dark, slim body with 3 yellow stripes extending from head to tail; 1 centered and the other 2 at approximately mid-way from center to belly scales/ground.

## Venomous Newborn and Young snakes



### **Northern Copperhead**



**Timber Rattlesnake**

- Newborn & young copperheads and rattlesnakes look just like mom & dad.
- Rattlesnakes have jagged lateral bands with an approx. 1" solid black color at the tail's end; a "blunt" tail end. Additionally, the stripe down the back – not always distinguishable on adults – is very prominent on newborns and is often a rust brown or olive green color.
- Copperheads have the hourglass pattern but newborns to about 1 yr old also have a greenish-yellow tipped tail (approx. 1" length).

## Non-venomous Newborn and Young snakes

### **Black Rat Snake**

- Newborn black rat snakes and black racers are patterned! Rat snakes have irregular shaped (but uniform to each other) blotches down the length of the body. Racers have elliptical, uniform blotches down length of the body. Their patterns run down through the tip of their pointed tails. There is **NO STRIPE DOWN the BACK!**
- Juveniles, until they are about 4 years old, are not highly patterned nor solid black. They are a mix of black, gray and white with no *truly* distinguishable pattern.
- Not pictured, the milk snake, water snake, garter snake, hognose and ribbon snake also look just like mom and dad. There are no distinguishing features between them and their parents.



**Northern Black Racer**

**It is illegal to kill, harm, harass, handle or collect timber rattlesnakes and northern copperheads (and their parts) under the NJ Endangered and Nongame Species Conservation Act.**

### **VENOMOUS SNAKE RESPONSE TEAM**

The NJ Div. of Fish and Wildlife's Endangered and Nongame Species Program (ENSP) is dedicated to the protection and survival of NJ's native snakes because they are an important part of our natural environment. The ENSP has trained volunteers that will remove rattlesnakes and copperheads from private property upon request. If you are in need of assistance or simply would like to report one of our rare species, please contact us:

Monday – Friday (8:30am – 4:30pm): (908) 713-1734, (908) 236-0173, (856) 629-5783  
After hours, weekends or when no contact with office: 1-877-WARN DEP (1-877-927-6337)



### **What to do if bitten by a venomous snake:**

- 1) Remain calm, keep the bitten portion of body lower than the victim's heart.
- 2) Get medical assistance IMMEDIATELY.
- 3) Tell someone what has happened so they may speak for you if you become unconscious.
- 4) Do NOT attempt to draw the venom out with anything, not even a venom extractor kit.

### **What to do if bitten by a non-venomous snake:**

- 1) Wash the injured area thoroughly.
- 2) If swelling and pain persist, seek medical assistance.

Special thanks to the photographers who shared their work with the ENSP. All photos copyrighted.

B.P. Kent (n. copperhead-left), A. Coutu (e. milksnake-right), M. Hogan (n. watersnake-left), J. Pini (n. watersnake-center), C. Myers (n. watersnake-right), H. Lord (e. milksnake-left, e. hognose-left, e. garter snake, newborn black racer), J. Battista (e. hognose-center), R.G. Arndt (e. hognose-right), R. Zappalorti (adult and young black rat snakes, e. ribbon snake), S. Forbes (newborn n. copperhead); all other photographs property of NJ DFW, ENSP.