

Venomous Snakes of Belize

THERE ARE EIGHT SPECIES OF DANGEROUSLY VENOMOUS SNAKES NATIVE TO BELIZE

VENOMOUS SNAKE IDENTIFICATION

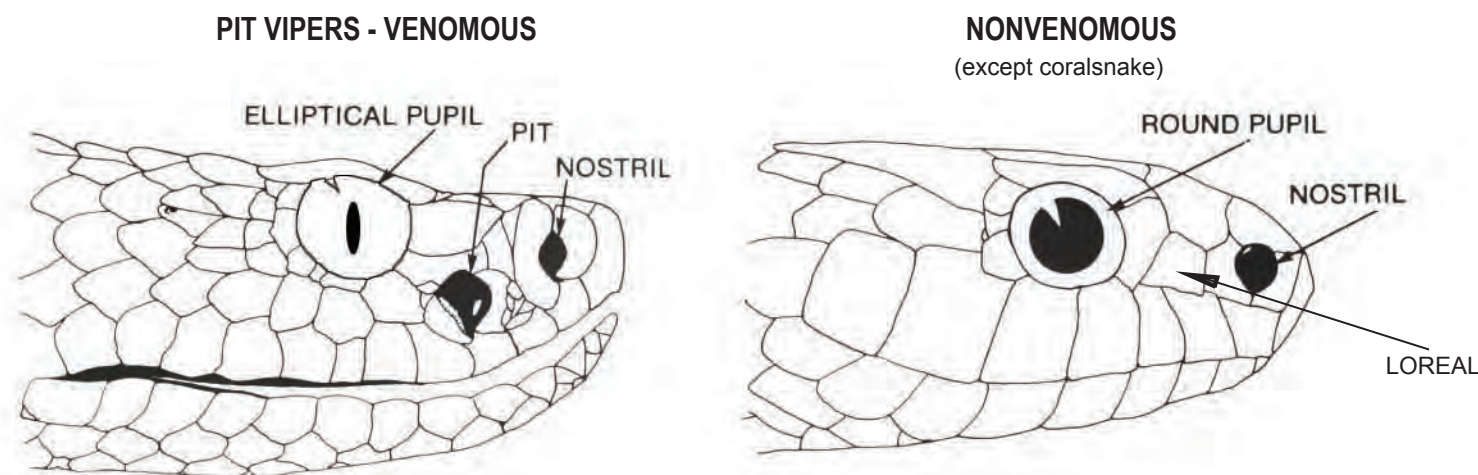
As a resident of Belize, you should learn to identify those regional species that may pose a threat to humans. Then, by process of elimination, all other snakes can be recognized as non-life threatening (nonvenomous). Knowing the following characteristics is helpful.

CORALSAKE - Red, black, and pale, whitish to yellow rings encircle the body, with every other ring being whitish to yellow along the body. Similar nonvenomous species (false coralsnake) have a loreal scale on the head and 17 dorsal scale rows instead of 15 in the true coralsnakes. Additionally, the false coralsnakes have either every other ring black (as opposed to whitish or yellow in coralsnakes) and/or the red-yellow-black-yellow ring pattern extends all the way to the tip of the tail (both species of coralsnake have only alternating yellow and black rings on the tail). IF YOU ENCOUNTER A SNAKE WITH RED, BLACK, AND PALE, WHITISH TO YELLOW RINGS, ASSUME IT IS VENOMOUS AND LEAVE IT ALONE.

PIT VIPER SPECIES - Pupils elliptical and sensory pit present between nostril and eye. HEAD NORMALLY TRIANGULAR, BUT BEST NOT TO RELY SOLELY ON THAT CHARACTERISTIC.

MILDLY VENOMOUS SPECIES - There are a few species of snakes in Belize that are not considered potentially deadly, but are capable of injecting mild venom. Different people have differing reactions, so it is advisable to seek medical advice for any snakebite. Even in the absence of venom, snakebites result in puncture wounds that may become infected and need medical attention.

The easiest way to recognize the eight venomous species is to learn their patterns and coloration, much as you do for common birds.



TO AVOID BEING BITTEN

1. Don't put your hands or feet in places you cannot see or have not examined. Do not turn over rocks, logs, or trash with your hands.
2. Don't crawl under fences, buildings, or other objects without carefully looking under them.
3. In the wild, don't sit, stand or walk without looking.
4. Don't wear low-cut shoes in areas known to be infested with venomous snakes.
5. Don't gather firewood after dark or without looking carefully.
6. Don't sleep on the ground near woodpiles, cave entrances, or swampy areas.
7. Don't be careless when moving objects left on the ground for several hours.
8. Don't disturb snakes, or unnecessarily try to kill them.
9. Don't handle 'dead' snakes with your hands.
10. Don't attempt to capture snakes unless you are skilled.
11. Don't get within a snake's striking distance while trying to identify it.
13. Don't stay near a snake if it bites you.
14. Don't forget that venomous snakes can climb trees, can bite under water, do occur in high elevation, may enter saltwater, and may appear in your garden.

EMERGENCY TREATMENT

1. Calm and reassure the victim; don't panic.
2. Remove all rings, bracelets, or other constricting items.
3. Immobilize the bitten area as much as circumstances allow. If possible, keep the bitten area at or above heart level. This is a newly accepted medical concept.
4. Take victim to medical facility as quickly as possible.

NOTE:

- Do not give victim any drink or food by mouth.
- Do not use a constriction band or tourniquet in the absence of an obviously severe envenomation.
- Do not place ice on bitten extremity.
- Do not make any cuts.
- Only a physician should administer antivenom.
- If feasible, take photo or bring dead snake for positive identification (use caution - don't get bitten again!)

SNAKEBITE STATISTICS

Most snakebites are by non-venomous species. Of all the bites by venomous snakes, particularly pit vipers, 25-50% do not inject any venom.

MORE IMPORTANT, MORTALITY IS INTERNATIONALLY LESS THAN 1% FOR VENOMOUS SNAKEBITES THAT ARE PROMPTLY TREATED BY PHYSICIANS, AND IT IS QUITE LOW IN BELIZE.

Venomous snakebites that are not physician treated with the proper antivenom may have a much higher mortality rate. It is best to get medical help and avoid local folk remedies.

IDENTIFICATION AIDS

Snakes pictured are generally typical; however, some variation in color and markings does occur. If in doubt, consult an identification expert.

Belize Zoo (501) 822-8000
 Wildtracks, Sarteneja Villiage (501) 650-6578
 Belize Audubon Society (501) 223-5004
 Programme for Belize (501) 227-5616
 Friends for Conservation and Development (501) 823-2657
 Belize Foundation for Research & Environmental Education (501) 671-1299

IDENTIFICATION GUIDES

Belize Audubon Society, 1995. *Snakes of Belize*. Belize Audubon Society, Belize City, Belize. 54 pp.
 Campbell, Jonathan A. 1998. *Amphibians and Reptiles of Northern Guatemala, the Yucatán, and Belize*. Univ. of Oklahoma Press, Norman, OK. 380 pp.
 Garel, Tony and Sharon Matola. 1996. *A Field Guide to the Snakes of Belize*. The Belize Zoo and Tropical Education Center, Belize, Central America. 147 pp.
 Lee, Julian C. 1996. *The Amphibians and Reptiles of the Yucatán Peninsula*. Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca, NY. 500 pp.
 Lee, Julian C. 2000. *A Field Guide to the Amphibians and Reptiles of the Maya World*. Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca, NY. 402 pp.
 Stafford, Peter J. and John R. Meyer. 2000. *A Guide to the Reptiles of Belize*. Academic Press, San Diego, CA. 356 pp.

VENOMOUS SNAKEBITE MANAGEMENT CONSULTATION

Check with your local emergency rooms to ensure that they have medical experience with venomous snakebites. The most experienced and capable hospitals in Belize, which have a supply of both pit viper and coralsnake antivenoms, are:

Belize Medical Associates (501) 223-0302
 Karl Huesner Memorial (501) 223-1584
 Western Regional Hospital (Belmopan) (501) 822-2263
 Corozal Hospital (Corozal) (501) 422-2081
 Southern Regional Hospital (Dangriga) (501) 522-3832
 Northern Regional Hospital (Orange Walk Town) (501) 322-2143
 Punta Gorda Hospital (Punta Gorda) (501) 227-2026
 San Ignacio Hospital (San Ignacio) (501) 824-2066
 La Loma Luz Adventist Hospital (501) 824-2050



Yellowjaw Tommygoff (Fer-de-lance)

Bothrops asper
 Photo by Jan Meerman



Eyelash Viper
Bothriechis schlegelii
 Photo by Steven Brewer



Central American Jumping Pit Viper

Atropoides mexicanus
 Photo by Bob Thomas



Yucatecan Cantil
Agkistrodon russeolus
 Photo by Kevin Zansler



Yucatán Neotropical Rattlesnake

Crotalus tzabcan
 Photo by Bob Thomas



Hognose Viper
Porthidium nasutum
 Photo by Derric Chan



Maya Coralsnake
Micrurus hippocrepis
 Photo by Dan Dourson



Variable Coralsnake
Micrurus diastema
 Photo by Bob Thomas



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Special thanks to David L. Hardy, Sr., M.D., Luz Marie Hunter, Friends for Conservation and Development, and Belize Foundation for Research & Environmental Education Drawings by Edmund D. Keiser, Ph.D.
 Graphic design by Paige Hinrichs
 July 8, 2019