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# SNAKES AROUND THE LAKE!

*Information on and identification of snakes  
around Hartwell Lake*



As more and more people move closer to the lake and clear natural habitat, encounters between humans and snakes will increase. Be assured however, that if your backyard contains a snake, it is probably a healthy place for you to live as well. Snakes are an important component of ecosystems because they play major roles as both predators and prey. Snakes are important food for hawks and great blue herons, among other animals. Many snakes are important economically because they eat rats, mice, and other animals deemed to be pest or nuisance species. One rat snake can eat up to 75 rats per year. They may not find this many rats in a year, but clearly one snake could have a significant positive economic impact by reducing the potential for serious diseases (e.g., hanta virus, Lyme disease) that are enhanced by high rodent populations.

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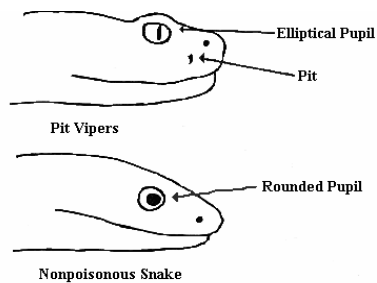
The venomous snakes typically found around Hartwell Lake are Copperheads, Timber and Pigmy Rattlesnakes, all of which are “pit vipers”. Pit viper means they have two heat sensory pits on the front of their head to detect heat from potential prey or predators. There have never been any documented sightings of Cottonmouths (Water Moccasins) in this area. The Cottonmouth is mostly found below the fall line in the lowland and coastal wetland areas. Although their range doesn't cover Hartwell Lake, always take precaution when trying to identify a snake. Copperheads are found all around the lake in wet wooded areas, high areas in swamps, and mountainous habitats, although they may be found just about anywhere. Adults are usually 2 to 3 feet in length. Their appearance is light brown or pinkish with darker, saddle-shaped crossbands. The head is solid brown or copper.

The Timber (Canebrake) Rattlesnake is found mostly in deciduous forests and high ground in swamps. Adults can reach 3 to 5 feet in length. Their basic color is gray with black crossbands that usually are chevron-shaped. Finally, the Pigmy Rattlesnake is found in wet areas along wooded habitats or swamps, scrub oak-longleaf pine forest habitats, or other wooded sites. Length does not generally exceed one foot and coloration is dull gray with dark gray or brown blotches on the back and sides. All three venomous snakes found at the lake are generally passive unless provoked (and then they are usually just protecting themselves).

Non-venomous water snakes you may encounter around Hartwell Lake are the Northern, Brown, and Red-bellied Water Snakes, and the Queen Snake. All are harmless and most will flee when approached by humans (by the way, the term “water snake” does not mean they only live in the water – they can be seen on land and water – and all snakes can swim). The most abundant water snake on Hartwell Lake is the Northern. They range in size from 2 to 3 feet, sometimes up to 4 feet. Their colors range from reddish brown to gray to brownish black, with dark crossbands on the neck and alternating dark blotches on the back and sides at mid-body. When you hear someone claim to have seen the venomous Water Moccasin, it was probably the somewhat similar looking Northern Water Snake. Water Moccasin adult colors are usually drab brown or olive with dark crossbands on their back. Another difference is that water moccasins are known to stand their ground and not flee, and when threatened, will open their mouth and expose the white lining of the mouth (it's just their way of

telling you to stay back). The Brown Water Snake colors are light brown on top with darker squares on the back and sides. They sometimes will attain a length of 4 feet. The Red-bellied Water Snake colors are uniform dull black, dark gray or brownish on its back and light red or orange on its belly. It also attains lengths of 4 feet. The last is the Queen snake; they are brown on top with an underside that is yellow with 4 dark stripes. They usually reach a length of 2 feet.

A frequently asked question is, "How do you tell the difference between a venomous snake and a non-venomous snake?" There is no easy answer and any snake that cannot be positively identified as harmless should never be picked up (and all snakes can bite)! Pit vipers have large, triangular-shaped heads, but so do non-venomous water snakes. Pit vipers have elliptical

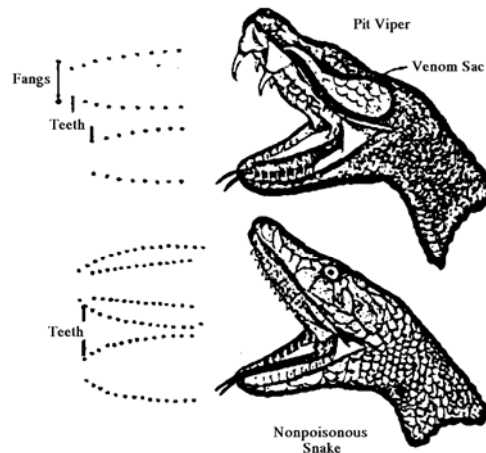


pupils, whereas all harmless snakes in this area have round pupils. Also, venomous snakes in this area tend to have distinct horizontal stripes on the sides of their head and non-venomous water snakes appear to have vertical lines on the sides of their head leading from their eyes to their lower jaw. No single rule separates all of the venomous species from all of the harmless ones, except the presence of fangs.

Bites from non-venomous snakes are for the most part harmless. In fact, with routine cleansing with soap and water, even the chance of infection is very unlikely. The majority of snake bites occur when people attempt to kill, capture or harass them. If a venomous snake bites you, you should try to identify the offending snake if you can do so easily without putting yourself at risk or wasting valuable time. You need to stay calm and get to the nearest hospital or emergency medical facility immediately and do not eat or drink

anything especially alcohol or medicines (unless directed to do so by a medical professional). If the snake is unidentifiable as venomous or non-venomous then take the above precautions. Several things you should not do if bitten by a venomous snake are: do not cut into or incise bite marks with a blade, do not apply a constrictive tourniquet, and do not freeze or apply extreme cold to the area of the bite.

Other snakes found in the area include: Black Rat Snake, Corn Snake, Black Racer, Eastern Coachwhip Snake, Eastern King Snake, Northern Pine Snake, Eastern Hognose, Eastern Garter Snake, Eastern Ribbon Snake, Mole King Snake, Eastern Milk Snake, Rough Green Snake, Scarlet King Snake, Scarlet Snake, Ringneck Snake, Eastern Worm Snake, Brown Snake, Eastern Smooth Earth Snake, Southeastern



Crown Snake. All are non-venomous. This shows you how diverse the population of snakes is in this area. To learn more about area snakes and snake identification, there are websites such as [www.snakesandfrogs.com/scra/](http://www.snakesandfrogs.com/scra/). You can also obtain information from your local department of natural resources office, bookstores, or libraries.

For years, people have mistaken venomous and non-venomous snakes. When we intrude into a snake's habitat, encounters will increase so it is important to know what you are looking at and learn to live around them. You should feel a little more comfortable knowing that the snake you saw along the waters edge was probably just a common, non-venomous northern water snake. We hope you found this helpful for your adventures around Hartwell Lake!

