

Venomous Snakes of Belize

THERE ARE EIGHT SPECIES OF DANGEROUSLY VENOMOUS SNAKES NATIVE TO BELIZE

VENOMOUS SNAKE IDENTIFICATION

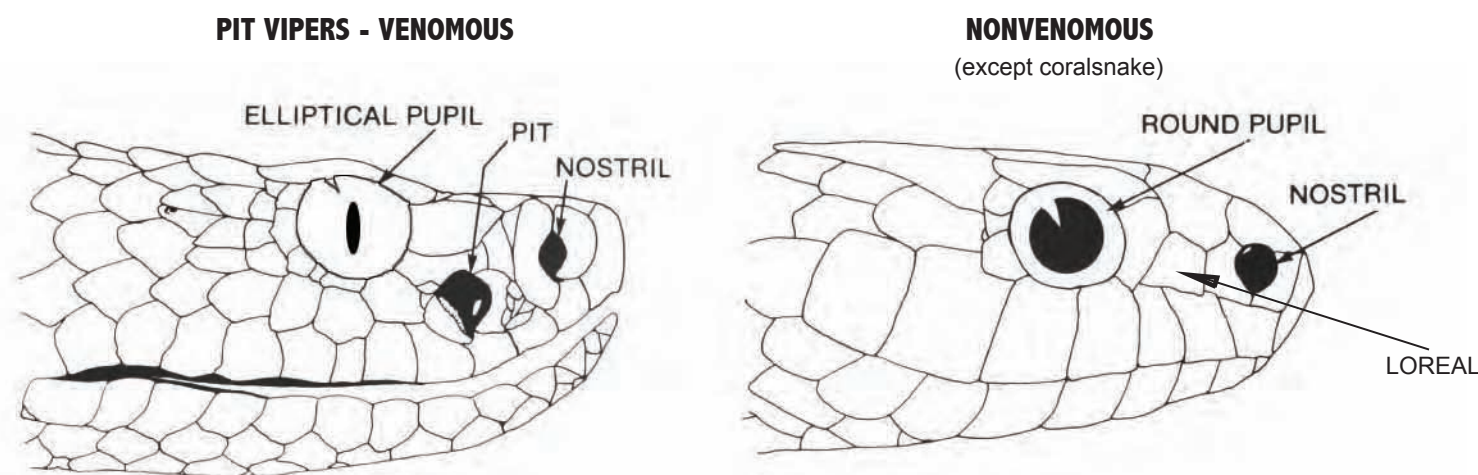
As a resident of Belize, you should learn to identify those regional species that may pose a threat to humans. Then, by process of elimination, all other snakes can be recognized as non-life threatening (nonvenomous). Knowing the following characteristics is helpful.

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 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. Keep the bitten area at or below heart level.
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. Instead, use THE EXTRACTOR®, manufactured by Sawyer, and recommended by some physicians skilled in venomous snakebite treatment. This instrument may remove venom by suction *without* the use of incisions.
Only a physician should administer antivenom.
If feasible, 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.



Yellowjaw Tommygoff (Fer-de-lance)

Bothrops asper
Photo by Jan Meerman



Eyelash Viper
Bothriechis schlegelii
Photo by Steven Brewer



Jumping Viper
Atropoides nummifer
Photo by Bob Thomas



Yucatecan Cantil, Tropical Moccasin
Agkistrodon bilineatus russeolus
Photo by Kevin Zansler



Neotropical Rattlesnake
Crotalus durissus terrificus
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

IDENTIFICATION AIDS

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

The Belize Vivarium, Belmopan City (501) 620-2345
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 Yucatan, and Belize*. Univ. of Oklahoma Press, Norman, OK. 380 pp.
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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
Belmopan Hospital (Belmopan) (501) 822-2263
Corozal Hospital (Corozal) (501) 422-2081
Southern Regional Hospital (Dangriga) (501) 522-3832
Orange Walk Hospital (Orange Walk Town) (501) 322-2143
Punta Gorda Hospital (Punta Gorda) (501) 227-2026
San Ignacio Hospital (San Ignacio) (501) 824-2066

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