

# Copperheads and the Department of Defense

The Copperhead (*Agkistrodon contortrix*) is a medium-sized pitviper native throughout much of the eastern, southern, and central United States. It is the most abundant venomous snake on military lands.

**Description:** Adult Copperheads typically measure between 22 to 36 inches (56 to 91 cm) in length. They range in color from beige, tan, or light orange with 10-21 reddish-brown crossbands that may look hourglass-shaped (wider on the sides and constricted at the dorsal midline). Juvenile Copperheads are more grayish in color than adults and have a yellow or yellow-green tail tip, which is used to lure prey. As their name implies, their heads are often an orange-brown or copper color. There are five recognized subspecies of Copperheads.

**Range:** Copperheads range from Massachusetts south to northern Florida, and west from southeastern Nebraska



to southwestern Texas and northeastern Mexico.

**Habitat:** This species inhabits a variety of habitats across its range, including most forest types (deciduous, mixed, and pine), scrublands, shrublands, grasslands, fields (particularly those with dense vegetation), and the edges of coastal marshes and wetlands. Copperheads are usually found in areas with abundant surface cover such as rocks, logs, stumps, or leaf litter. They can survive well in suburban areas.

**Behavior:** These snakes emerge from overwintering sites in early spring. As conditions warm they disperse into seasonal activity ranges, mate, and forage. In the warmer summer months they may become nocturnal. Copperheads are ambush predators and will consume a variety of animals, including small mammals, small snakes, lizards, amphibians, insects, and small birds. Copperheads bite more people in most years than any other U.S. species of venomous snake, according to the North Carolina State University Cooperative Extension Service. Fortunately, their bites are rarely fatal to humans.

**Military Interactions:** Copperheads are the most abundant venomous snake on U.S. military lands. Occasionally, this species is encountered in military housing and active training areas, which may pose a risk to humans and the snakes alike. It is recommended that installation natural resources personnel have expertise with removing nuisance snakes. To assist you, DoD PARC has developed a *Venomous Snake Safety and Removal* training video that is available on the Environmental Compliance Assessment, Training, and Tracking System (ECATTS) website: <https://environmentaltraining.ecatts.com>.

**Conservation Status:** Copperheads are not federally protected. They are state-endangered in Iowa and Massachusetts. This species has a NatureServe conservation ranking of G5-Secure and IUCN Red List category as Least Concern.

**Threats/Planning Considerations:** Habitat destruction, intentional killing, poaching, road mortality, snake fungal disease (SFD). Military natural resource managers should try to maintain forested, shrub and grassland habitats used by this species and educate military personnel on the potential dangers associated with living and working around this venomous snake.



## Occurrence on Military Lands

Confirmed	Potential
Confirmed present on 45 Army, 21 Navy, 11 Air Force and 4 Marine Corps installation across its range.	Up to an additional 20 Army, 16 Navy, 15 Air Force and 2 Marine Corps installations across its range.

