

Elapidae

This family contains only one Louisiana snake, the coral snake. This highly venomous snake is a distant cousin to the cobra, krait and mamba snakes of Africa and Asia. The coral snake's fangs are fixed in the front part of the upper jaw and do not fold back like those of the vipers. Instead of striking at its prey, the coral snake will grab onto the object, chewing or gnawing on the victim. The venom then seeps into the wound. With such a small mouth the coral snake is limited as to the areas it can effectively bite. Toes and fingers are prime sites.

The coral snake is very secretive and rarely encountered outdoors. Though venomous like the pit viper family, coral snakes lack the classic loreal pits and have round rather than vertical shaped pupils like harmless snakes. The coral snake is brightly colored with red, black and yellow rings encircling the body. This bright coloration is nature's way of announcing this creature is poisonous to predators. Several other Louisiana snakes look similar to the coral snake and are called coral snake mimics, but they are all harmless. These mimics include the scarlet snake, scarlet king snake and the Louisiana milk snake. The familiar rhyme about the sequence of color rings on these snakes is a good way to tell the different species apart, especially since one is venomous: "red on black, friend of jack, red on yellow, kill a fellow". Coral snakes are oviparous, which means they are egg layers. The eggs are laid in June.

The venom of coral snakes is neurotoxic and acts on the central nervous system. Bites from coral snakes may be painless and not exhibit any swelling around the area of the bite. Sometimes symptoms from this bite may cause drowsiness or anxiety but may not be apparent for several hours. It would appear that a coral snake bite was a "dry" one with no obvious painful symptoms like those experienced with the pit viper bites. Neurotoxic venom on the human system causes the muscles which control breathing and heartbeat to stop functioning. Bites from coral snakes are very rare.