

Venomous Snakes of Trinidad & Tobago

THERE ARE FOUR SPECIES OF DANGEROUSLY VENOMOUS SNAKES NATIVE TO TRINIDAD, AND NONE OCCUR IN TOBAGO

VENOMOUS SNAKE IDENTIFICATION

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

CORAL SNAKE - Red, black, and pale, whitish rings encircle the body. The black rings are either single (bordered by pale, whitish rings) or in triads. Similar non-venomous species (false corals) have black rings in pairs. IF YOU ENCOUNTER A SNAKE WITH RED, BLACK, AND PALE, WHITISH RINGS, ASSUME IT IS VENOMOUS.

MAPEPIRE (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 Trinidad & Tobago 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 four venomous species is to learn their patterns and coloration, much as you do common birds.



Mapepire balsain (Fer-de-lance)

Bothrops asper

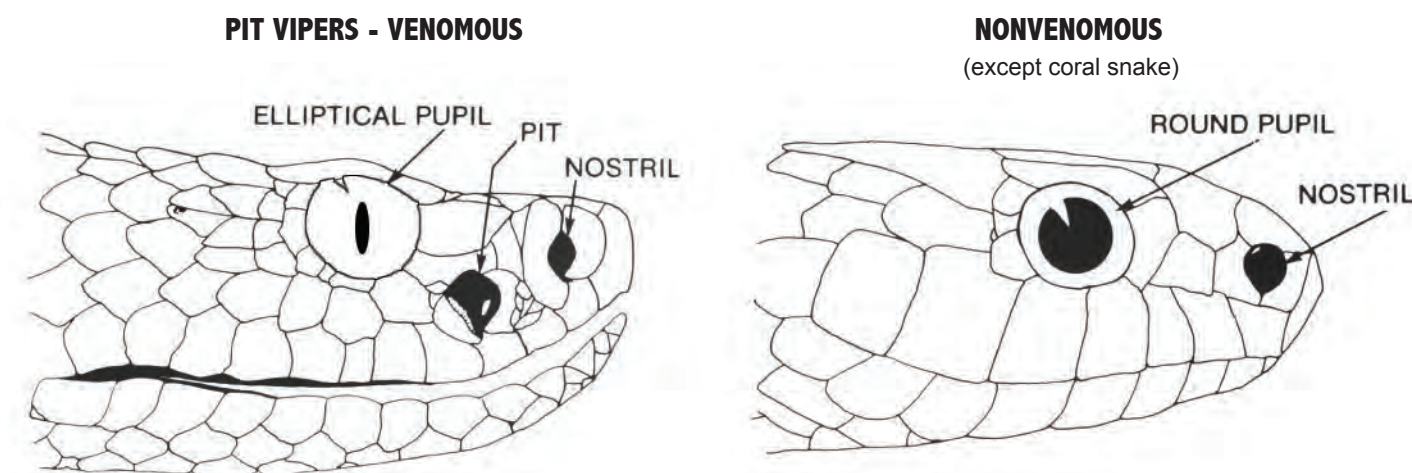
Photo by John C. Murphy
Up to about 2 m



Mapepire zanana (Bushmaster)

Lachesis muta muta

Photo by William B. Montgomery
Up to about 3.5 m



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 altitudes, 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 TRINIDAD & TOBAGO. 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 AID

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

Asa Wright Nature Centre (Trinidad)*
Emperor Valley Zoo (Port-of-Spain)

(868) 667-4655
(868) 622-3530
(868) 622-5344

Asa Wright Nature Centre
William Beebe Tropical Research Station, also known as Simla
*Ian Lambie Education Unit can be reached at: asawrightconsedu@gmail.com

IDENTIFICATION GUIDES

Boos, Hans E. A. 2001. *The Snakes of Trinidad & Tobago*. Texas A&M Univ. Press, College Station. 270 pp.
Murphy, John C. 1997. *Amphibians and Reptiles of Trinidad and Tobago*. Krieger Publ. Co., Melbourne, FL. 245 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 hospital in Trinidad, which has a supply of both pit viper and coralsnake antivenoms is:

The Sangre Grande Hospital (Ojoe Road, Sangre Grande) (868) 668-2273



Large coralsnake

Micrurus lemniscatus diutius

Photo by John C. Murphy
Up to about 1 m



Common coralsnake

Micrurus cirinalis

Photo by John C. Murphy
Up to about 0.5 m