

COPPERHEADS

Quint T. Guier

I have been asked to write another historical story for the Jackson Purchase Historical Society's yearbook, but my poor eyesight prevents me from doing research; consequently, I shall revise a story which I wrote more than forty years ago.

In a practical way instead of a scientific one I have been an ardent student of nature all of my life. One segment of natural history which has been interesting to me is that of the wildlife in Kentucky's share of the Jackson Purchase area. The segment of wildlife which has interested me most has been that of snakes.

Of the many families of snakes native to the Jackson Purchase area in Kentucky, the copperhead has been the object of my intense study. Besides being intensely interested in snakes and their ecological relation to other forms of wild life, I have had eight interesting personal encounters with copperhead snakes like none I have ever heard about. These successive stories are actual events and are true to the "nth" degree.

The copperhead snake is one of the four venomous snakes in North America. The other three are the rattlesnake, the cottonmouth water moccasin, and the coral snake.

The copperhead is primarily a nocturnal feeder. Unless disturbed they rarely move about in daytime. They are dangerous and lie practically concealed ready to strike at anything within their reach. The female copperhead strikes more readily than the male. The female copperhead is larger than the male and her color is subdued. The male copperhead has a flashy patchwork color of brown, red, yellow, black, and white. It is the most beautiful member of the reptile family.

When we moved from Trigg County to our farm in Calloway County our nearest neighbor told us that our farm was badly infested with copperhead snakes. We had reason to believe that statement. We killed thirty-two copperhead snakes the first year we lived on that farm.

I have pinned to the ground dozens of copperhead snakes for safety and teased them, causing them to strike into a tender stalk of poke. They would sink their two fangs into the tender stalk of poke and withdraw them quickly and drop three drops of venom from each of the two fangs as rapidly as they could fall onto the two punctures. Within a few minutes the snakes would strike again. The second time only two drops of venom would fall from each fang. After a short rest period the copperhead can be made to strike a third time and only one drop of venom would be released from each fang. I have never been able to tease a copperhead into striking more than three times. When their immediate supply of venom has been used they will not strike again until it has been replaced.

Many times I have teased copperheads and had them to strike the toe of my work shoe or an axe handle or the handle of a grubbing hoe. They will not strike a hard object a second time. It is amazing how much oily amber-colored venom is squirted out of each fang when a copperhead bites a clean hard axe handle.

On August 28, 1906, my father, my brother Dennis, and I suckered toacco all day. We left the field a little before sundown and walked out onto a

dim farm road. Right in front of us was a large female chicken snake stretched out to her full six feet in length. Our farm dog seized her and began to shake her vigorously. Small pieces began to fly out in all directions. We thought the pieces were parts of the snake's entrails. One piece hit Dennis in the chest and stuck to the bib of his overalls. He plucked it off and laid it across his palm and said, "This isn't a piece of a snake's guts, it's a whole snake and a copperhead at that." We were puzzled. We cut open the chicken snake and discovered that she had swallowed a female copperhead snake half as long as her length of six feet. We then cut open the copperhead snake and discovered nine unborn little copperheads that had not been dislodged in the tussle with the dog. We then searched and found nine little copperheads that had been thrown free by the dog. We knew there were eighteen unborn copperheads, probably more, because some were lost in the grass and weeds.

This is the most fascinating snake tale ever told or written, to my way of thinking, but it is a true one.

We learned much about snakes from the two families of snakes we met on our farm that day — one dangerous; the other harmless and useful. We wondered whether we were living with them on our farm or if they were living with us. Two of our family narrowly missed being bitten by copperhead snakes that were hidden under a leaf of tobacco.

We knew that chicken snakes were oviparous, but we did not know that copperhead snakes were viviparous. It was a good lesson in on-the-spot herpetology. That big chicken snake may have saved the life of some member of our family. After our encounter with the two snakes a command was heard, "No chicken snakes are to be killed on this farm."

Ten months later, in June, 1907, my father, my two brothers Dennis and Ira, and I were making hay in the field farthest from the house. When the dinner bell rang we stripped the harness off the four mules, mounted them, and rode to the house. Ira was twelve years old and eager to get to the dinner table; therefore, he rode in front. About two hundred feet from where we encountered the big chicken snake the year before, he stopped and called to us, "Hurry. Here is a long chicken snake swallowing a copperhead." We hurried to the scene and all stopped and looked in amazement at a six-foot male chicken snake in the process of swallowing a full-grown male copperhead snake. The chicken snake had the copperhead snake about half swallowed. We made an effort to unfold the two snakes tales that took place on almost the same garden spot. This is our conclusion. The male and female chicken snakes had staked out that territory as their domain. The male and female copperhead snakes had staked out the same territory as their domain. The two pairs of snakes declared war and the male chicken snake finally won the war.

This is the second time I have had positive proof that chicken snakes fight copperhead snakes and win, then swallow the victim.

Fifteen years later on a farm of my own but four miles away, I mowed a small field of red clover for hay one June day. Two days later when I started to rake the hay the rake teeth were rusty and did not shed the hay so I dismounted from the rake seat to clear the tangled hay from the rake teeth. I found about an arm's length of the tail end of a large chicken snake. I started to throw the piece of snake to one side and saw something brown protruding from the severed end of the snake. I put my foot on the brown object and

pulled the snake's tail and exposed the head end of a mature copperhead snake. Before I finished raking the hay I found the head end of the chicken snake with the tail end of the copperhead snake inside it.

This was the third time I had positive proof that chicken snakes fight and overcome copperhead snakes and then swallow them.

I do not know whether there is natural enmity between chicken snakes and copperhead snakes, or whether a copperhead snake is a dainty morsel to a chicken snake.

After this third encounter with chicken snakes and copperhead snakes two other incidents occurred in rapid succession. The third incident in this snake tale occurred in a certain June; the other two incidents in that year occurred in the following August.

On the second Saturday in August of a certain year I went to my apple orchard to bring a basket of apples for an apple pie the next day. On my way I saw what I believe was the largest chicken snake that I had ever seen, a female. Out of her mouth protruded something about the length of a person's finger. I guessed that it was a lizard's tail.

I picked up the snake to carry it to the house to show it to my four-year-old daughter, Martha, who had never seen a snake. It was longer than I am tall and I had to hold my hand above my head in order for the snake's head to clear the ground. The snake was heavy and I had put it down on the ground to rest my arm. The snake began to quiver as if it were cold. In less than a minute it vomited a copperhead snake about the size of my thumb. I took the snake on to the house, showed it to Martha, then took the giant chicken snake back to the garden and gave her her freedom and my blessing.

On the last Saturday in the same month I went squirrel hunting and stepped out of a dim road onto an old plantbed site. I sat on a log across one end of it to listen for a squirrel to bark or drop a nut to indicate its position. In a few minutes I heard a rustling in the leaves behind me. I turned my head to see what was making the noise but saw nothing. I sat quietly for about fifteen minutes longer and heard the rustling in the leave a second time. I turned my head and looked more carefully but still saw nothing. In about another fifteen minutes I heard the rustling for the third time. Then I put my gun down on the ground and stood upon the log and looked carefully around me. About twenty steps away and slightly up hill I saw two snakes fighting. I carefully approached to about fifteen feet of the two snakes and stood transfixed at what was taking place. A large blue racer snake and a copperhead snake, half the length of the blue racer, were in mortal combat. While I looked on the blue racer unwound its body and quickly moved its body away from the copperhead. Then I saw that the blue racer held the copperhead firmly in its mouth just back of the head. The blue racer released the copperhead and drew its head away quickly out of reach of the copperhead.

The blue racer began its plan of attack by circling the copperhead counterclockwise just out of reach. The copperhead maintained its fighting position with its head slightly down hill and straight to the south and to me. The blue racer with its head raised about eight inches and its head turned sharply to the left toward the center of the circle where the copperhead lay moved slowly around the copperhead. On the second time around when the blue racer's head was in the nine o'clock position it would stop and throw a loop of its body out in front of the copperhead then withdraw it before the copperhead could strike. The blue racer would tease the copperhead in that

manner until the copperhead would strike. As quickly as a flash the blue racer would seize the copperhead by the back of its neck and they would start rolling and tumbling again. That plan of attack never changed. It was repeated over and over as I watched the fight for a whole hour. Finally the blue racer wore its adversary down and succeeded in turning the copperhead's head back against its body forming a loop about six inches long. As quick as a wink of an eye, the blue racer wrapped its body around the loop and put the strangle hold on the copperhead. Evidently that was the blue racer's plan of attack. The blue racer held the copperhead tightly in a stranglehold grip for twenty-nine minutes. At that moment the blue racer began slowly to relax its hold. Being satisfied that the copperhead snake was dead the blue racer maneuvered the copperhead's head into its own mouth without releasing it from its own jaws. The blue racer held the copperhead's head tightly between its jaws for twelve minutes then began to swallow it slowly about one half inch every minute.

After seeing that snake fight I had a healthy respect for the intelligence of a snake. It is not a stupid animal.

In August of the following year I came upon the largest and longest copperhead snake that I had ever seen. About a foot back from the snake's head was a short section of its body as large as man's arm. I wondered what it had swallowed. I cut the snake open and learned that it had swallowed a squirrel. I had been feeding about fifty hogs in the lot in the woods for two years and there were squirrels in the trees because there was a plentiful supply of feed nearby. Probably the squirrel had been wounded by a hunter and finally died and fell out of a tree.

The snake was moving in daytime which was unnatural for a copperhead; they are nocturnal. The snake was forty-two inches in length and inside it were rolls and rolls of yellow fat. I supposed that the copperhead had been living on the droppings from the hogs which was rich in all the food elements. The rich food could have been the reason for the extra size, length, and fat of the copperhead snake. The snake was a male and probably had no mate.

On Saturday, September 1, an old man named Jesse Grubbs, who lived less than two hundred yards from my house, was hunting squirrels near a log tobacco barn which stood on a wooded bluff on my farm. There were always copperhead snakes around the barn and along the bluff. Jesse Grubbs almost stepped on a large female copperhead snake that had just crawled out of the barn. As he was looking up in the trees, he was not being careful where he put his feet. Out of the corner of his left eye he saw a movement by a female copperhead snake as she jerked her head back into position to strike, and he jumped to safety. He stepped back a few steps and shot the mother copperhead. The mother snake was about ready to give birth to her young for some of her little ones had crawled away from the mother's torn body the distance of about two feet after she was killed.

Five men helped me fill the barn with tobacco on Monday, September 3. Jesse Grubbs was one of the five men who helped me cut tobacco on that Monday, and he told us that he shot the mother copperhead late afternoon of the previous Saturday.

Six weeks later I was smoking my tobacco when Rex Smith and Oscar Turner came to Rex's barn about a hundred yards away but on another farm. They had a mule and started to drag some heavy logs into his barn to

use in smoking his tobacco. The heavy logs had been in a pile all summer. The men rolled the logs apart and uncovered a female copperhead snake and her brood, which had been born perhaps two or three weeks. The day was October 12. The men called to me, "Come over here. We want to show you something!"

I could hear the two men talking excitedly to each other and understood what they said before they called to me. I went over to them. Between two of the logs was a large, female copperhead snake in her characteristic position to strike if we should come near her and her family of newly born copperheads that were crawling all over her. The newly born copperheads were about five inches long and their body size was a little smaller than the wire in a six penny nail. We guessed that they were born in September. There were eighteen young ones.

This is near the end of my snake story. I could have told this story with half of the words but there would have been room for many questions. I have been meticulous in describing each of the eight separate incidents to make the knowledge to the reader about copperhead snakes equal to what I know about them.

Copperhead snakes get their name from the color of their head which is the color of copper. At maturity the length of a copperhead may reach forty-two inches, and in body size it is equal to a pop bottle. It is sneaky and dangerous. The time of mating is early spring in April and early May. Their gestation period is about one hundred and fifty days. They give birth to as many as two dozen in September. The young are fed by regurgitation. I do not know how long they live.

