

This past September, I found an eastern coral snake. I located the little snake, all of one foot long and almost certainly a yearling, under a decomposing oak log on a vast sand ridge above the Altamaha River. The experience left me awash in memories, for I have always been a coral fanatic. Coral snakes, as you may know, are members of the Family Elapidae and possess some of the most potent venoms in the snake world; their old world cousins include cobras, kraits, and death adders.

In 1988, when I was still a young'un and a recent college grad, a nighttime "road-cruise" on a remote, primitive road on the west side of the Okefenokee Swamp produced my first-ever *Micrurus fulvius* (eastern coral snake). A native of elapid-less Illinois, prior to my translocation to south Georgia I had spent years poring over the *Peterson Field Guide* and other regional treatments of the North American herpetofauna with an almost catatonic intensity. So, when I spotted a section of candy cane, marked with a repetitive series of red–yellow–black rings, blocking my path, and it moved, I knew instantly what it was.... Leaving the still rolling vehicle, a brief melee ensued, my truck nearly rolling into a ditch. Later that evening, I found yet another coral, this one a gorgeous 30-inch female found slinking across the road near Hortense, in southeast Georgia's Brantley County.

I suspect that most herp-passionate folks can recall what they were wearing,

Pictured at the top of the page and below:
Eastern coral snakes.



Lovely but venomous, reclusive yet dazzling, the eastern coral snake is little-known and seldom-seen denizen of Georgia's low country habitats.

IN PRAISE OF CORAL SNAKES

DIRK J. STEVENSON

the date, the time, the weather, and maybe even how many games separated the Atlanta Brave's closest rivals from first place, when they encountered their first coral snake. From a pay phone at a moth-splotched minit-mart, I called first my girlfriend and then my parents, simply to announce the breaking news, "I have found my first ever coral snakes... even more beautiful than anticipated... I have

found two so far tonight, and I'll be going back out and road-cruising some more..."

My Mother, who at first tolerated my passion for herps but later participated, even bringing me a county-record red milk snake—sadly, found DOR (dead-on-road) during her exercise-walk and protected by a neatly folded napkin placed softly in a pocket of her blouse—interrupted, "I'm happy for you kiddo,



The handsome, foot-long coral snake found by the author under a log at Big Hammock Natural Area in Tattnall County.

but it's pretty late here... Let me put your father on—maybe he's up for one of your reptile stories at midnight."

Erroneously, corals are considered by many to be diminutive, harmless bracelets of scales. Of the nearly 60 species of coral snakes (the group is limited to the New World, with species diversity highest in Central and South America), there are many that will bite savagely if restrained or similarly harassed, and a handful that reach five feet (1.5 meters) in length and the girth of a man's finger. In Georgia, our eastern coral snakes are typically quick to flee in hopes of escape into nearby leaf litter. However, legendary herpetologist and Florida ecologist Archie Carr (1909–1987) wrote of one that turned and struck directly at his foot.

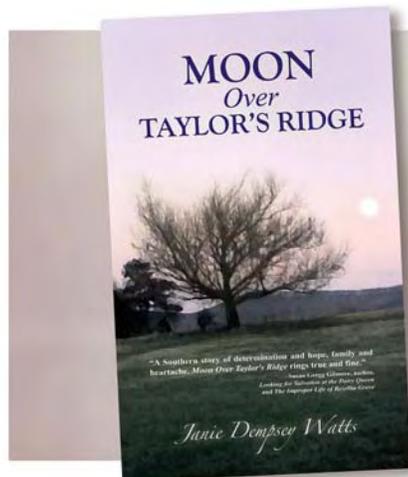
I've seen a number of eastern corals that ranged from 30 to 40 inches in length (the record slightly exceeds four feet), and looked on as a colleague gently pinned a good-sized adult with his snake boot only to have it immediately whip around and apply repetitive chew-bites, ankle-high, with the authority of a sewing-machine. Generally, though,

coral snakes are retiring and inoffensive and will do everything under their power to avoid us.

Every bit as strange as they are beautiful, the diet of corals is typically dominated by elongate vertebrate prey. Many species of coral are strongly ophiophagous (snake-eating) and cannibalism occurs on occasion. Snake prey is invariably swallowed headfirst—it slides down smoother that way. The fairly small fangs of coral snakes are fixed in position near the front of the upper jaw, unlike our vipers (copperheads, cottonmouths, and rattlesnakes), the large fangs of which retract into grooves on the roof of the mouth when not in use.

Our Georgia *Micrurus* relish skinks and small snakes—like ringnecks and crowned snakes, but any snake will do. The western coral snake, *Micruroides euryxanthus*, an inhabitant of Sonoran desert regions of Arizona, New Mexico and Mexico, has a profound fetish for blind snakes. Some tropical species may consume odd animals like caecilians, amphisbaenids, or, in the case of the strapping (to five feet in length) and aquatic *Micrurus surinamensis* of the Amazon Basin, elongate fishes like eels.

An eastern coral snake photographed at Big Hammock Natural Area, Tattnall County, Georgia.



Praise for Janie Dempsey Watts' *Moon Over Taylor's Ridge*:

"Strengthened by the sturdy Cherokee hills of her youth, a woman's unexpected trip home takes her on a journey into the windows of her heart. Beautifully written and historically rich, this slice of the south is very satisfying."

—Jennifer Youngblood, author, The Paper Rose Club

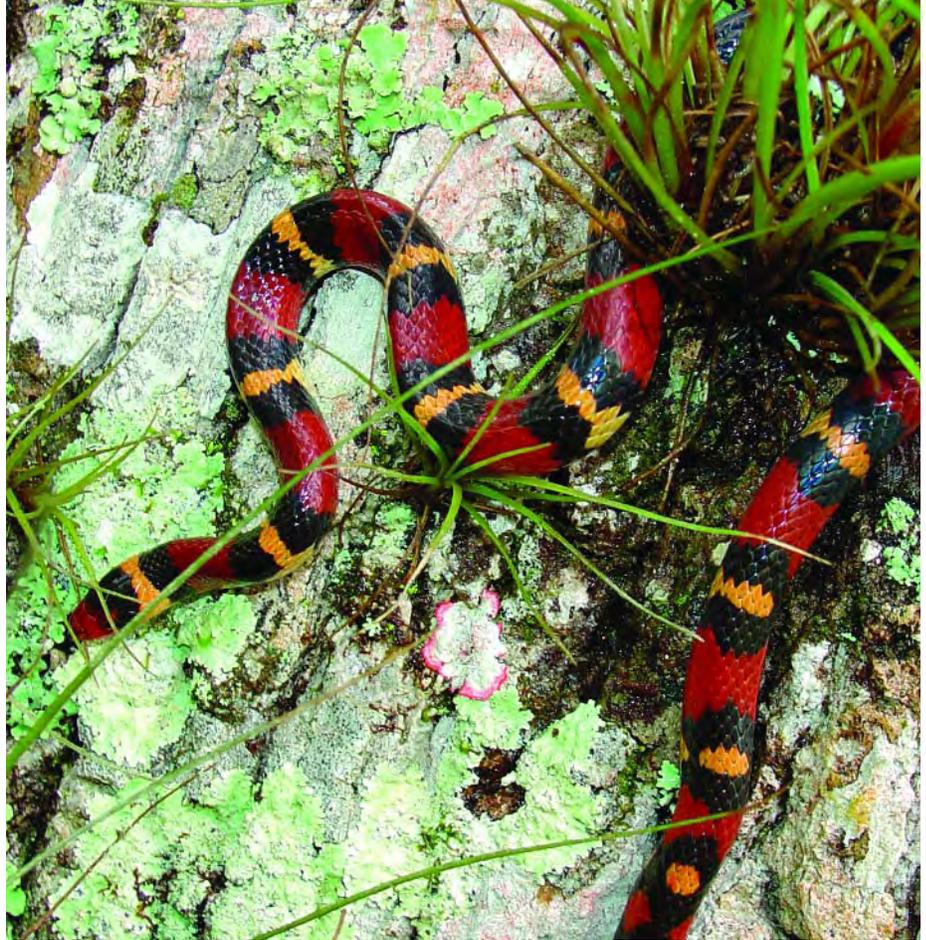
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The scarlet kingsnake, common in southern Georgia, is considered by some herpetologists to be a coral snake mimic.

Generally, coral snakes are either nocturnal, crepuscular, or, when diurnal, active early in the morning or late in the afternoon. It was quite a surprise then, when on an expedition to Costa Rica, my wife and I found a *Micrurus alleni* swimming across the Tortuguero River at midday.

In a marvelous sentence in his book *Snakes: The Evolution of Mystery in Nature*, acclaimed herpetologist Harry Greene of Cornell University describes coral snakes as “confusing, cylindrical, protean, harlequin, lacquer-like, nervous, ornamented, shiny, supple, surreal, treacherous and unpredictable.” I might add “spasmodic,” “autonomous,” and “subterranean.” Greene’s a coral snake expert, and his book and numerous scientific papers (especially on mimicry) germane to this group of snakes make for fascinating reading.

As a testament to just how secretive and sneaky these little tri-colored serpents are, my recently discovered coral snake (found under the turkey oak log) was only my third coral observation in 15 years and many hundreds of walks at this particular site—Big Hammock Natural Area in Tattnall County. Big Hammock is a remarkably austere, oak-clad dune complete with evergreen hammocks that have an almost tropical luxuriance. It’s a very special place to me. Between thunderclaps, I proposed to my wife here, under oaks draped with Spanish moss and close to the handsome blossoms of



flowering *Elliottia racemosa* (Georgia plume), a sandhill endemic. I can’t remember if I kneeled when I proposed, but it’s highly likely that at some point I shuffled some leaf litter in hopes of flushing a *Micrurus*.

The other corals I have found at Big Hammock included a snake basking at the mouth of a longleaf pine stump and another under a piece of “fat-lighter” deeply embedded in the sand. The same day I found the latter, I looked up to see a gorgeous seven-foot male indigo snake resting motionless on the ground near a gopher tortoise burrow. On other sojourns to this natural area, I have spot-

ted the chocolate-blotches of a plump southern hognose snake and the newly shed skins of an eastern diamondback rattlesnake litter strewn about the black widow web-laced openings of a massive pine stump. In actuality, I see very few snakes at Big Hammock, but these sightings will keep me coming back.

In Georgia, eastern coral snakes are restricted to the low country of the Coastal Plain, where the species prefers pine-palmetto habitat and sandy landscapes, especially longleaf pine sandhill environments. The species is also found on the coast and on some barrier islands, usually in maritime hammocks. The species is now

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A pigmy black-backed coral snake photographed by the author in the Peruvian Amazon.

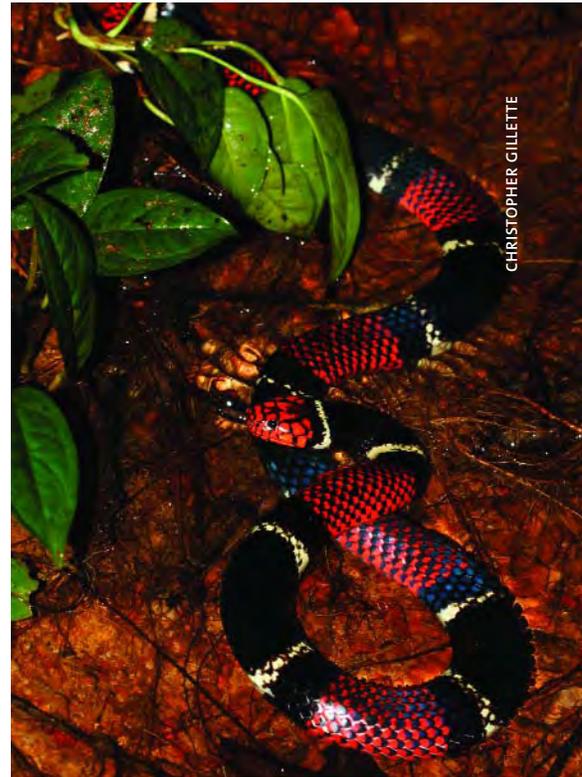
uncommon and locally distributed in Georgia and is tracked as a “Species of Special Concern” by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources.

Two species of non-venomous snakes native to Georgia, the scarlet snake and the scarlet king snake, possess similar bright coloration and thus are sometimes mistaken for coral snakes. The oft-repeated ditty, “red touch yellow, harm a fellow; red touch black, friend of Jack” comes in handy. The red and yellow rings of the venomous coral snake are in contact, while on the non-venomous scarlet snake and scarlet king snake, red rings or blotches are in touch with black pigment.

As engaging as any of Georgia’s other 40 native species of snakes, the garishly-patterned, singularly venomous (yet remarkably secretive) eastern coral snake is a valuable component of our natural heritage. Should you spot one of these harlequin beauties slithering through the leaf mold, count yourself lucky!

To learn more about the fascinating snakes of Georgia check out The Orianne Society website (www.oriannesociety.org/) and the excellent *Amphibians and Reptiles of Georgia* (2008), University of Georgia Press, Athens.

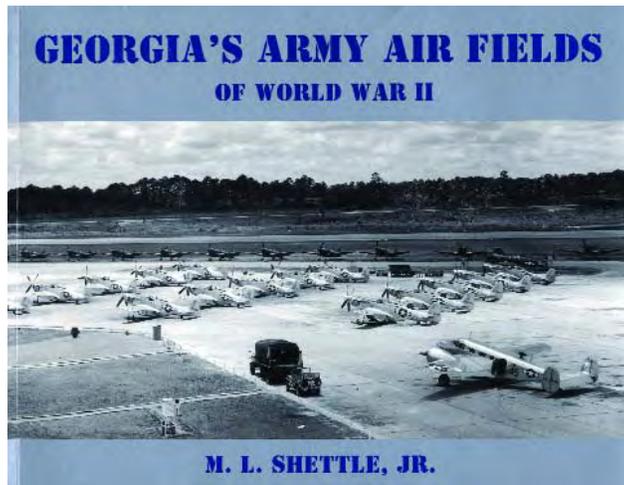
Dirk Stevenson, a herpetologist with The Orianne Society, lives in Hinesville.



CHRISTOPHER GILLETTE

The flattened head, pinprick eyes and bulldog jaws of this aquatic coral snake (*Micrurus surinamensis*) found in the Peruvian Amazon lend it a menacing countenance.

WE LIVE IN FAME OR GO DOWN IN FLAME



This 140-page, 11”x8.5,” softcover book, *Georgia’s Army Air Fields of World War II*, includes more than 200 rare World War II vintage photographs, many published for the first time, of Georgia airfields, facilities, aircraft, and personnel. A wide variety of aircraft are pictured, from trainers to fighters to bombers, including classics like the SBD Dauntless, B-17 Flying Fortress, B-24 Liberator, B-25 Mitchell, B-29 Superfortress, P-39 Airacobra, P-40 Warhawk, and P-51 Mustang. Featured are 22 airfields and bases from Atlanta to Thomasville and Waycross.

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