



Eastern Coral Snake found in Coosa County, Alabama. 20 April 2009

By Mark Bailey, Herpetologist

The eastern or—as some now insist on calling it—“harlequin” coral snake, *Micrurus fulvius*, is among the most beautiful and least frequently encountered snakes in Alabama. (And deadliest, I suppose I should add.) I have found only one in the wild, in Florida, near the margin of a flatwoods pond. A few years earlier a coral snake was found by some Auburn herpetology students on a field trip I led at Eglin Air Force Base. [Dave Steen](#) tells me he found a road-killed one down at Eglin just this past weekend. Before Monday, I would tell you that if I were ever to see a coral snake in Alabama I would expect it to be somewhere near my home in south Alabama where there are a few historic occurrences. I tend to think of coral snakes as a Coastal Plain species, and I have long wondered about those very few reports (one each) from three counties above the Fall Line: Coosa, Bibb, and Talladega. Those reports are now over 40 years old, and there are two “coral snake mimics” out there that are commoner and often cause confusion resulting in erroneous reports. The one specimen in the Auburn University Vertebrate Museum that is attributed to Coosa County bears no specific locality data, and is therefore questionable. So, I suppose I have been something of an agnostic regarding the existence of coral snakes anywhere in Alabama north of the Black Belt. Until Monday.

I was driving from Andalusia to Shorter to meet Eric Soehren, with whom I’m co-editing a book on natural communities of Alabama. Later we were to drive to Auburn to meet with Debbie Folkerts, our other co-editor. I was still a few miles south of Montgomery when Eric called with the big news that Nick Sharp and Josh Landrum (his

co-workers at ADCNR State Lands Division) had just gotten a CORAL SNAKE at one of the red-cockaded woodpecker sites that was recently acquired by Forever Wild. I was very familiar with this area of natural longleaf pine north of the Hatchet Creek arm of Mitchell Lake about an hour north of Montgomery, having monitored that woodpecker population for several years before the state acquired it. I'd seen a pigmy rattlesnake and an eastern coachwhip in that area before, and while coral snakes had crossed my mind, one had never crossed my trail the way Nick's did. It happened fairly early in the morning, which is when Dr. Bob Mount says most Alabama specimens have been encountered. Nick gingerly scooped it into his backpack and called Eric, who was taking the day off to work on the book. Eric and I had nowhere to be until 4:00, so we decided to chuck the book for a while and run up to see and photograph the snake, so we planned to meet in Montgomery to ride together. Then I got the idea that we really ought to get a tissue sample for future DNA study, since we'd be releasing the snake rather than collecting it as a voucher. I called Jimmy Stiles, who had more experience than me in collecting snake tissue, and he advised a small clip off the tail tip. But what to preserve the tissue in? Eric and I ended up meeting at an ABC store and buying a small bottle of Bacardi 151 (75 % alcohol) rum, which had enough ethanol in it to do the trick.

We finally got to the scene and saw the snake, and after much back-slapping and picture taking, we realized what a deadly combination we had: a coral snake, a bottle of rum, and Josh's pistol (he's an enforcement officer). We decided we'd best be extra careful before clipping that tail (Nick had that honor). It was a great April day for all of us, especially Nick. And now whenever anybody questions whether coral snakes can be found in Alabama's Piedmont or Ridge and Valley, I know what I'll tell them. And I'm going to start looking harder for them myself.

