



WILDLIFE NOTES

CORAL SNAKE

"Red touch yellow, kill a fellow; red touch black, friend of Jack," the saying goes. But that shouldn't happen unless a fellow is careless and lets the pretty little snake hang on to a finger or toe while it works its tiny fangs into the skin.

Of the two clearly distinct species of coral snakes in the United States, only the Arizona coral snake (*Micruroides euryxanthus*) is found in New Mexico. A small, slender snake, seldom longer than 20 inches and a half-inch in diameter, the coral snake is the most brightly colored of our poisonous snakes.

Brilliant bands of red, white and black make the snake highly visible against almost any background, a marked contrast to the protective coloration found on most poisonous snakes.

Coral snakes are generally shy and non-aggressive. They will bite a finger if one is offered, but unlike rattlesnakes and other vipers, this little snake does not strike at its victims.

A close kin to the cobras and mambas of India and Pakistan, the coral snake also injects a neurotoxic venom into its victim. The venom slows down or arrests breathing, heart rate and other vital processes. If the snake injects enough venom, the bite can be fatal.

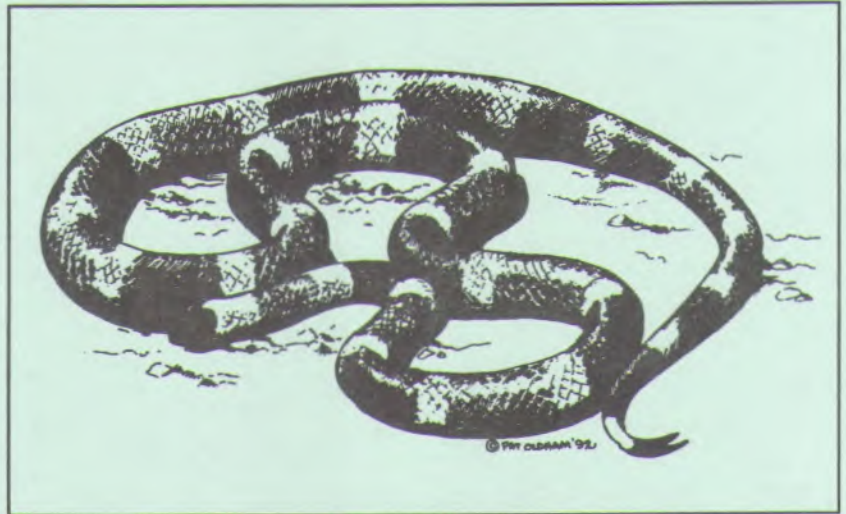
Frequently in the case of rattlesnake bites, the victim has surprised a snake, or vice-versa. Most injuries from coral snakes, however, occur when the snake is being handled. One characteristic is predictable from most documented accounts: Once the snake attaches itself, it doesn't want to let go.

The coral snake feeds on lizards and the young of other snakes. Content to live the life of a recluse, it gets into trouble for a couple of reasons. One, it is a small, colorful, non-threatening snake with a docile nature that seems to invite handling. Two, it looks enough like a number of non-poisonous snakes to be mistaken for a harmless mimic.

All instances of biological mimicry require the acting out of three roles: The model (coral snake), the mimic (another look-alike species), and the dupe (a creature that mistakes the mimic for the model). Milk snakes and king snakes hope to be avoided by predators because they mimic the coral snake.

There is no label for the person who mistakes the model for the mimic, but nine of 14 coral snake victims in a list of studies thought they were handling a harmless snake (from the *Journal of the American Medical Association*).

If you see a pretty little snake, think of the red and yellow warnings of a traffic light before you pick it up. One means stop, the other caution. "Red touch yellow, kill a fellow."



CORAL SNAKE RANGE MAP

