

WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

WATER MOCCASIN

This article features a species that is NOT found in Victoria Park — or, at least not by me in the 8 1/2 years of exploring our community's natural areas. And for every case in which a Water Moccasin has been reported by someone else in Victoria Park it has turned out to be the unrelated, nonvenomous Florida Water Snake. There are certainly Water Moccasins in our area. I've seen and photographed them in Lake Woodruff National Wildlife Refuge, Tiger Bay and Lake George State Forests, and other nearby places, but never in Victoria Park.

This fairly large, thick-bodied, dangerously

venomous snake is a close relative of copperheads and rattlesnakes. They're all "pit vipers", with a pair of heat-sensitive holes or pits, one on each side of the face between the eye and nostril (see photo). These pits enable the snakes to sense warm-blooded animals. They also share large, triangular heads, with the widest part being at the back where the venom glands are located. And, unlike our other snakes, they have vertical rather than round pupils (see photo).

The best way to distinguish a Water Moccasin from Florida's several species of harmless water snakes is its distinctive facial pattern: a broad dark stripe across the face extending from the front of the eye to the back of the head, plus a light stripe above this and a light stripe below this. The body color is usually dark brown with a pattern of faint, darker bands, but young ones are lighter and more colorful.

Contrary to popular belief, this is not an overly

aggressive snake. If frightened or cornered, it will coil up, stick its head straight up, and gape widely, showing the cottony-white mouth lining that gives it its other common name — Cottonmouth. But if left alone, it will not strike or attack and will try to escape into the water or vegetation. Water Moccasins eat fish, frogs, small mammals, and birds, and they also scavenge dead animals from roads and the discarded catches of fishermen. They're almost always found around water.