

WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

EASTERN CORAL SNAKE

Carefully peeling back the loose bark of a large, standing, dead pine tree, I searched for hidden creatures to show the 30 people who accompanied me and naturalist, Marg Goldschneider, on our Victoria Gardens nature walk in mid-Feb. Perhaps, I explained, there would be a beetle, spider, scorpion, tree frog or even a corn snake hiding in the damp shade. But I saw nothing. Then a woman declared, “there is a snake on the tree”. She was pointing farther up the tree trunk. And there it was, fully 10 feet above the ground, magically clinging to the bare, dead trunk — a big, beautiful Eastern Coral Snake!

The Eastern Coral Snake is both one of the most beautifully patterned and dangerously venomous snakes in the United States. Gaudily decorated

in rings of red, yellow, and black, the coral snake is certainly a memorable sight on the rare occasion when one of these very secretive serpents crawls into the open. Like some stinging wasps and poisonous caterpillars, its bright colors are meant to send a message to potential predators: stay away — I'm bad news! Two other Florida snakes — the scarlet snake and the scarlet king snake — have evolved to mimic the colors of the coral snake and thus achieve protection from predation. However, these 2 harmless mimics have the 3 colored bands in a different order: red-black-yellow instead of red-yellow-black. Remember the rhyme: “red touching yellow, kill a fellow; red touching black, friend of Jack (or, venom lack)”. Better yet, don’t touch any snake; just let them live undisturbed in the wild.

The Eastern Coral Snake’s venom is a powerful neurotoxin and is potentially fatal, although very few people ever get bitten and hardly any die. Coral snakes avoid contact with people and are very quick to retreat beneath pine needles,

leaf litter, and grass. Only when grabbed or stepped on will a coral snake bite with its short, rigid fangs (which are permanently erect and not folded up against the roof of the mouth when not in use, like those of a rattlesnake).

So what was this coral snake doing 10 feet up a tree? My guess is that it was chasing a skink (a lizard)—one of its 2 favorite prey items (snakes are the others)—that was hiding beneath the loose bark. Lucky for me, the coral snake was no longer under that bark when I reached in with my fingers.