

WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

By John Serrao

FLORIDA WATER SNAKE

During the past few weeks I've received several requests to remove "Cottonmouths" from residents' properties. In every case, these snakes have turned out to be non-venomous Florida Water Snakes rather than the venomous Cottonmouth ("Water Moccasin"). In fact, in my 9 1/2 years as a resident here I've never seen a Cottonmouth in Victoria Park, although I've seen plenty of them in other natural areas throughout central Florida and the rest of the state. Every single water snake that I've encountered in our V.P. communities has been a non-venomous water snake.

The Florida Water Snake does bear a superficial resemblance to the Cottonmouth. Both species are usually brownish in color, with bands across the body. Sometimes these bands can be quite

colorful, but other times the snake can be so dark that the bands are hard to discern. The Florida Water Snake is very variable, with some individuals being almost reddish or orangish rather than brown, but almost always with some traces of banding along the body.

The best way to distinguish the 2 species is by the facial pattern. The Cottonmouth has a whitish line over the eye, then a thicker dark band going through the eye and across the face, and then another whitish line below the eye (the upper lip). The Florida Water Snake usually has just a dark line that starts behind the eyes and extends diagonally down to the rear of the jaw, plus a series of dark vertical lines along the upper lip. Both species may appear to have “diamond-shaped” or triangular heads, especially when the Florida Water Snake flattens its entire body to look bigger and scarier. Also, the pupil of its eye is round, not vertical like that of the Cottonmouth — but it’s not a good idea to get that close to see this feature.

Although harmless, the Florida Water Snake will bite if handled and strike if cornered. Some people may experience minor inflammation from this bite, so it's a good idea to just leave this common reptile alone and allow it to pursue its prey of frogs and fish.