



Letters

to Nature Kids

June 2022 🌸 No. 6



A baby cottonmouth seen in the Big Thicket (photo by Meghan Cassidy)

Dear Nature Kids,

Recently, my good friend Meghan and I found a very young cottonmouth on the road here in north Texas. She and I have found several of these snakes on our outings together. One was a particularly beautiful baby we found in the Big Thicket in southeast Texas, and there was a big adult cottonmouth in Caddo National Wildlife Refuge in east Texas. None of these snakes has tried to hurt us, and yet they could easily send us to the hospital if we weren't careful.

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Some of you may have seen a cottonmouth, copperhead, rattlesnake, or a coral snake (our four kinds of venomous snakes) when you have been in nature somewhere. Chances are that nothing bad happened, but it might have seemed scary. I think we should talk about how we can visit places where venomous snakes live. We can stay safe without letting fear get in the way of enjoying nature.

I really like cottonmouths (sometimes known as water moccasins). I didn't always like them – like some of you, I had heard stories about an angry, aggressive snake that might chase you. It turns out that those stories are mostly not true. A few cottonmouths are irritable and get mad – or scared – easily, just like some people. All of them that I have known don't want any trouble, and they try to get away from us or if they have to, they try to warn us to leave them alone.

I have to tell you that I worry a little when I talk this way about cottonmouths, or any venomous snake. What I worry about is that you might think these snakes are no big deal, or that they're actually friendly. What I really hope is that you will understand the truth about venomous snakes. The truth is that we must be careful and respectful, but we don't have to be so afraid that we don't enjoy our time in nature.

Any snake will think of **us** as dangerous. We're big, and most big things in their world can kill them. And so when we come around, most snakes will either (1) freeze in place and hope we do not see them; (2) try to get away; or if neither of these will work, (3) try to scare us away or defend themselves by biting. That's the strategy, even for venomous snakes. They would much rather let us walk on by or else try to get away than bite us. They **do not** understand that we might be curious or friendly, so you should expect that if you approach a snake, it will be frightened and think it is being attacked.

Let me tell you what happened with the one we saw at the Caddo refuge. Meghan spotted him*, and then I did, and while she took a couple of photos, I got my snake hook ready. I wanted to move him to a better place to take pictures. At this point he was relying on the first strategy, the one where



An adult cottonmouth (photo by Meghan Cassidy)

* We can't be sure he was a "he," but that feels better than calling him an "it."

they freeze and hope we will walk on by. Then as I got close with the hook, the snake jumped into action, trying to get away. Strategy number two, try to escape.

The hook is about four feet long and the end of it is “L”-shaped. I caught the snake with the hook and pulled him back into the open, but he slipped away and headed for the brush again. I hooked him again, and then was able to get him to balance on the hook and carry him a short distance to a better spot for photos. At this point he used strategy number three, which for a cottonmouth involves opening the mouth wide without trying to bite. He just sat there, showing us his cottony-white mouth as a warning. Like saying, “Hey, see this? Leave me alone!” The snake never tried to bite us. After some more photos, we wished him well and walked away.



The cottonmouth at Caddo NWR, mouth-gaping to warn us – not trying to bite (photo by Meghan Cassidy)

What if I had pushed my luck? Maybe tried to touch the snake? That would have been a **terrible** idea, and easily could have made the snake bite me. And while most people survive cottonmouth bites, they are terribly painful and can leave you with disabilities in the area of the bite, like joints that don't work or problems with nerves and muscles.



The Caddo NWR cottonmouth (photo by Meghan Cassidy)

I tell you this story only to make clear that I know from experience that cottonmouths are not mean and they don't want to chase you. What I did, using the snake hook, required training and experience and you definitely should not try anything such as that. What the average person could do if they find a snake like that is to make sure they have a clear path to back away and then watch from a safe distance.

I have a few rules to help keep you safe on nature walks and camp-outs:

1. Your **EYES** always go before your hands and feet. Many bites happen when someone accidentally puts their hands (or feet) on or near a venomous snake – make sure to look first.
2. Never touch things if you don't know what they are. That is especially true for trying to catch something you “think” is a harmless snake. **No guessing!**
3. Never put your fingers or hand under rocks, logs, boards, or in holes or burrows, since you can't see where you're reaching.
4. Go with an adult and make sure they know where you are.

If you have any questions about snake safety when you are out in nature, or cottonmouths or other venomous snakes, I would be glad to hear from you and try to answer. I have a Facebook page - <https://www.facebook.com/livesnature> - and you can email me at livesinnature@outlook.com.

Stay cool over the summer and have fun!

🐍 Michael

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