

# Timber Rattlesnake

*Crotalus horridus*

## Introduction

The timber rattlesnake (*Crotalus horridus*) has become so rare that it is now listed as **“Endangered”** in Connecticut under the Connecticut Endangered Species Act. The habit of rattlers to hibernate together in dens during the winter led to large numbers of snakes being killed or collected in the past by people who discovered the dens. Killing or harming a rattlesnake is now **prohibited**, and any sighting should be promptly reported to the Wildlife Division of the Department of Environmental Protection at (860-642-7239).



*Dark phase timber rattlesnake basking on a ledge*

Because one of the few remaining known rattlesnake dens in Connecticut is in Meshomasic State Forest, this information sheet is being provided to you as an owner of property near the State Forest. It explains the proper precautions to prevent rattlesnake bites, and briefly describes the life history of this species in an effort to educate residents and avoid human actions that might result in harm to the snakes.



*Yellow phase timber rattlesnake basking on a ledge*

## Identification

This thick-bodied, sluggish, banded snake has both a light (i.e. “yellow”) and a dark color phase, both illustrated above, with background color ranging from yellow, tan, or gray to almost black. The head is

broadly triangular. A unique fieldmark is the horny rattle that is “buzzed” when the snake is disturbed. Even newborn snakes have a single horny “button.” A new segment is added to the rattle every time the snake sheds, typically twice a year. The young are born live in late summer, about 1 foot long, and already equipped with venom and fangs. Rattlesnake skin appears rough because the scales are ridged. They are very well camouflaged as they rest on in forested habitat, on logs or shrub foliage, lying in wait for rodent prey, which they detect by vibrations, vision, odor, and with two heat sensor “pits” (i.e., infrared radiation receptors).

## **Snakebites**

Timber rattlesnakes are extremely passive and rely on their “cryptic” coloration to remain undetected. Unprovoked snakes do not attack humans. Rattlesnake bites are extremely rare and fatalities even more so. Even in Pennsylvania and New York State where the species is much more common than in Connecticut, there have been no recorded fatalities for the past several decades. Defensive bites are “dry” with no release of venom, about 30% of the time. Individuals vary widely in sensitivity to snake venom. The bitten person should be kept still, because an increased heart rate will speed the spread of venom, and medical attention should be promptly sought. Using a tourniquet and sucking out venom is *not* recommended.

## **Habitat, Seasonal Patterns, and Behavior**

Timber rattlesnakes prefer dense woods with rugged terrain, which includes rocky areas and bedrock outcrops. Sunny forest edges and forest clearings can also attract rattlesnakes. The likelihood of running into a rattler varies with the season. It is zero between late October and early April, when the snakes are in their winter hibernation den in a rocky ledge. During the summer, snakes fan out from their dens, stopping along the way to forage for a few days at a time, and in late summer they begin to head back to the den. Male rattlesnakes travel in search of the scent trail of a receptive female.

Snakes may be seen basking on rocks or other sunny places. Basking is essential behavior for pregnant females, who typically bask in groups relatively near the den. Warm sunshine helps control parasites and facilitates shedding for all snakes. They also hide and forage in brush piles and rock piles.

Rattlesnakes are shy, and usually move away when they detect a human. Even a very large snake cannot strike more than three feet. However, defensive encounters and snakebites can occur when a human accidentally touches a well-camouflaged snake, for example by reaching into a brush pile, or stepping on a snake in tall grass. A rattle will not necessarily precede a strike.

## **Precautions**

- ◆ Never attempt to pick up a rattlesnake, even if it appears dead.
- ◆ Watch where you step. Wear high-topped leather hiking boots and loose-fitting full-length pants in unmowed or brushy areas during summer when an encounter is most likely.
- ◆ Be cautious around brush piles, stone walls, and piles of rocks, logs, or boards.



- ◆ Keep grass mowed short in your frequently used outdoor living areas.
- ◆ Consider erecting a three-foot high fence (without slats or gaps) between your outdoor living area and the naturally vegetated portion of your yard.

If a rattlesnake should be found in your yard, it is likely just making a several day stopover en-route to or from its winter den. Preventing uninformed snake-killing is essential for the survival of this species, which reproduces at a slow rate, though adults can live over thirty years. Females reach sexual maturity at age seven to ten, breed only every three to four years, have litters of just nine young on average, and the young experience high mortality. Only ten Connecticut towns still have a rattlesnake population.



*Light or "yellow" phase timber rattlesnake; note "cloudy" eye indicating the snake is about to shed.*

Information Sources: Fact Sheets produced by the Wildlife Division of the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection (CTDEP), and by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYDEC); Rattlesnakes in Pennsylvania State Forests produced by the Pennsylvania Dept. of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR); Eastern Timber Rattlesnake Habitat Assessment Report, Clark Hill Road Property, Town of East Hampton, Middlesex County, CT by Ecological Solutions, LLC, dated 9-17-05, including a radiotelemetry study by Robin Lemieux (dated 9-27-04); Connecticut Wildlife (2004) by Geoffrey A. Hammerson; Amphibians and Reptiles of Connecticut and Adjacent Regions (1993) by Michael W. Klemens; photos by Tony Iannello of Cheshire.

Note: This fact sheet has been reviewed for content and accuracy by the CT DEP Wildlife Division.



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