



VENOMOUS SNAKES FACT SHEET SERIES

georgiawildlife.com

Timber Rattlesnake

Crotalus horridus

The Timber Rattlesnake is a large and commonly encountered snake. However, they are actually rather shy and avoid development and interaction as much as possible.

Description

Timber rattlesnakes are large and heavy-bodied. The body is covered in keeled scales, and the anal plate is undivided. The general pattern is a series of butterfly-shaped saddles transitioning to rounded or hard-edged bands going across the back. There may or may not be a stripe coming from the eyes to the back of the jaw. Young timber rattlesnakes look like adults but are only about a foot long at birth and grayish in color. The head is wide and gracefully angled and is distinctly wider than the neck. Like other pit vipers, there is a pit on each side of the face in between the eye and the nostril. These heat sensitive pits enable the snakes to locate and accurately strike at warm-blooded prey. The tail is solid black, earning the species the local name of 'Velvet Tail'. Like other rattlesnake species, they have rattles on the end of the tail. The rattles are made of hollow individual ringed segments of keratin, which when shaken clack against each other and create a loud, harsh buzzing sound.



Photo by Berkeley Boone

Range & Habitat

Timber rattlesnakes are found throughout the entirety of Georgia, except for a few locations in the extreme southwestern corner. In the United States, they are found across most of the eastern half of the country. They prefer wooded, undisturbed areas—especially mixed pine-hardwood forests. Timber rattlesnakes are often found in the vicinity of old homesites and barns because of the available cover and use of the area by prey animals.

Myth & Legend

One of the frequent misconceptions about rattlesnakes is that they will always rattle before striking. A surprised snake is perfectly capable of striking without warning. They do try to sit motionless and avoid being discovered, but rattling is also a warning to move along. Another myth about rattlesnakes is that they 'hyponotize' their prey before striking them. This is untrue, and there does not seem to be a clear origination point. Perhaps it stems from snakes not blinking. Or perhaps it comes from an observer seeing potential prey pause in front of the snake, simply because it smells or otherwise senses the snake, but cannot see it. Historically, Ben Franklin

championed timber rattlesnakes as models of courage, stating “She never begins an attack, nor, when once engaged, ever surrenders.”

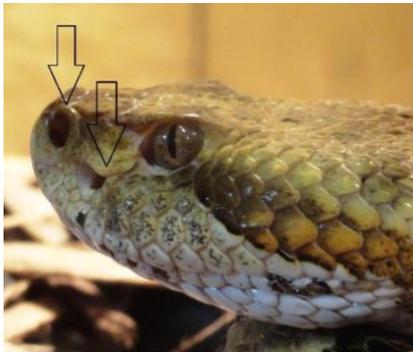
Natural History

Interestingly, timber rattlesnakes appear to have different forms across their range. These forms vary by size, color and general habits even though it has been shown there is not any genetic variation.

The northern populations are often known as timbers, and the southern populations are called canebrakes. The northern form tends to be a little smaller in size (3.5–4 feet), and has rounded dark blotches against a brown, olive or gold background. Some individuals may be mostly black overall. They tend to favor rocky, upland slopes or mountainous areas and may spend the winter in communal denning sites. The southern form is a bit larger (4.5–5 feet) and has a wider variety of background colors: gray, brown, tan, yellow, orange and even pink. The pattern is made of bold chevrons (‘W’ shapes) and there is usually a strong reddish orange stripe running down the middle of the back. These snakes like mixed hardwood forests, particularly in bottomlands and floodplains, and tend to spend the winter individually in stumpholes or other underground shelters. Particularly in the northern regions of the state, timber rattlesnakes enter a dormancy period. They may emerge briefly on warm sunny days, but generally remain hidden away until spring arrives. Courtship and mating occur in late summer and early fall, and the young are born late the next August or September. These



The black tail is characteristic. The southern form also has very bold chevrons across its back. Photo by Berkeley Boone



The heat-sensitive pit (lower arrow) is located between the nostril (upper arrow) and the eye. Photo by Berkeley Boone

rattlesnakes are quite long lived. Individuals have lived nearly 40 years in captivity and known to live around 30 years in the wild. Timbers eat warm-blooded prey almost exclusively, with small rodents like mice, rats, chipmunks and squirrels making up the majority of their diet. Birds, like bobwhite quail and other ground-associated songbirds are also eaten. Timber rattlesnakes provide a valuable disease-elimination service: by eating white-footed mice, an individual snake inadvertently consumes up to 1000 ticks per year, thereby reducing tick-borne diseases. Even as ambush hunters, these rattlesnakes have a unique method of hunting. They will coil next to a fallen log and rest their chin at an angle on the side of the log. As the prey animal moves along the surface, the snake is alerted to its presence and strikes when the animal is within range.

Young rattlesnakes may be eaten by king snakes or racers, large raptors, bobcats and feral hogs. Not much will attempt to kill and eat an adult.

Conservation

In some areas the population is robust, but in other regions it is much less so or highly fragmented due to habitat loss. Many people kill these snakes on sight because of fear.