

## Timber Rattlesnake: A Candidate for Threatened and Endangered Species in Pennsylvania

The Timber Rattlesnake is listed on Pennsylvania's Wildlife Action Plan as a species of immediate concern. It is one of seven reptiles in this highest priority tier. It is therefore protected under specific regulations by the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission (PFBC). New regulations took effect in 2007 to increase the protection for the species.



Distribution of *Crotalus horridus* in Pennsylvania (PFBC 2010)

### Do Not Kill a Rattlesnake!

The timber rattlesnake is a protected species in Pennsylvania. Taking (killing, injuring, harassing) of timber rattlesnakes without a permit is prohibited. Please consult the most recent "Pennsylvania Summary of Fishing Regulations and Laws" (supplied with fishing licenses and available online) or direct questions to:

Natural Diversity Section  
Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission  
450 Robinson Lane  
Bellefonte, PA 16823  
[www.fish.state.pa.us](http://www.fish.state.pa.us)

### Dos and Don'ts

- Most rattlesnakes rattle when approached or feel threatened. If you hear rattling nearby, retreat and proceed by another route or proceed only after identifying its location. Do not attempt to displace or capture the snake. Timber rattlesnakes are not an aggressive species and will avoid human contact if given the opportunity to flee or retreat under cover. .
- Never walk barefoot or with open shoes (sandals) when hiking through Pennsylvania's wild lands.
- Keep your dogs leashed when hiking whenever practical. Be watchful of what they investigate especially when unleashed. While most dogs will avoid a rattlesnake, don't make any assumptions. A rattlesnake will strike if it feels threatened and is approached too closely.
- Timber rattlesnakes may seek temporary shelter as well as food (rodents) in outdoor man-made structures (wood pile, construction debris, etc). If one is found, realize that its occupancy is only temporary and that in few days it will move to another location, probably the natural environment from where it came from.



*Timber rattlesnake litters are usually divided between light and dark. The dark coloration is more common in northern Pennsylvania.*



## The Timber Rattlesnake in Pennsylvania



*Timber rattlesnakes are one of the remaining symbols of Pennsylvania's wilderness areas. Timber rattlesnakes are also one of the most misunderstood yet fascinating creatures. This brochure is intended to answer many questions that people have about encountering timber rattlesnakes.*

# Pennsylvania's Timber Rattlesnake

---

## Did You Know?

- Timber rattlesnakes prey mostly on mice, voles, and chipmunks and in doing so provide a valuable ecological service by helping to control their numbers. Not surprisingly, rural Pennsylvanians will agree that "a good outdoorsman never kills a snake."
- Timber rattlesnakes in the early spring and summer travel on a course that initially takes them further and further away from their overwintering sites. By late summer they may be as much as 5 miles from their starting point prior to their return to the den site. The same areas are used by the same snake year after year.
- Male timber rattlesnakes require 5 to 7 years to reach sexual maturity, and 7 to 9 years for females. Both sexes are long-lived — up to 30 years or more.
- Adult females reproduce at 3 and 4 year intervals. Despite their potential for longevity a female timber rattlesnake may reproduce only 3 to 5 times during her lifetime.
- Timber rattlesnakes do not lay eggs and are a live-bearing species. Litters size varies from 7 to 10 young. Birthing occurs in late August to early September, at locations usually within 1/2 mile of overwintering sites. Typically, only one young out of every litter survives to adulthood. Newborns must fend for themselves from birth as well as find their way back to the den by scent trailing an adult.
- Rattlesnake sightings are common during summer from July to early September. This is the mating season for the timber rattlesnake. Males search for mates at this time and may travel up to several miles in search of receptive females. The young from this mating are born the following summer in August/September. The increased sightings in late summer is therefore related to mating activity, rather than a need to search for water.

- Males are larger than females. The average adult male is approximately 42 to 46 inches in length while adult females range from 34 to 38 inches in length.
- Timber rattlesnakes are rarely aggressive and will typically retreat or hide under cover when threatened. Rattling in snakes evolved in response to the presence of large herbivores, such as elk and buffalo, to avoid being trampled and to issue a warning to avoid a confrontation.



*The adult color phase, either light (yellow) or dark (black), have nothing to do with the sex and is simply a genetic trait. Researchers use the head color to reference the color phase rather than the body color of the snake.*

- Maintaining a several foot distance from even the largest timber rattlesnake will be more than adequate for safe viewing and photographing.
- Bites from timber rattlesnakes are rarely lethal to humans when prompt medical attention is sought. There have been no human fatalities in PA in more than 25 years and truly accidental bites are extremely rare.
- Bites are commonly sustained to the hands and arms and as a consequence of attempting to capture or handle a timber rattlesnake.

- Snake bite treatment in humans and animals requires neutralizing the venom with anti-venin. Never apply a tourniquet to a rattlesnake-bitten extremity nor attempt to cut or remove the venom by suction. *Seek medical attention as soon as possible and do not wait to experience symptoms.*

---

## What to Do If a Timber Rattlesnake is Encountered...

- The encounter will undoubtedly be a startling experience for both you and the snake. Remember, a timber rattlesnake will never attack and perceives you as a predator rather than a prey (it's afraid of you!). Retreat calmly and allow the animal to continue its course or to seek cover.
- Do not kill the snake! In the absence of the appropriate permits you stand the risk of being in violation of the PA Fish and Boat Code and penalties may apply.
- Do not attempt to capture, handle, harass or displace a timber rattlesnake. If you're in a wilderness area leave the animal where it was found!
- Call a local government authority or nearest PA FBC facility to have a timber rattlesnake removed from your yard.
- If necessary, safe capture and removal can be accomplished by directing a snake with a broom to a large plastic trash bin pressed firmly to the ground.