

Timber Rattlesnake

Crotalus horridus



TPWD PHOTO



Timber rattlesnakes have wide heads and narrow necks—a typical distinction of all venomous snakes except coral snakes (*Micrurus fulvius*). Timber rattlers are the second largest venomous snake in Texas and third largest in the United States.

Northern Pineywoods

Timber Rattlesnake

Crotalus horridus



APPEARANCE

Length: 36 to 40 inches (91 to 101 cm)

Weight: 1.3 to 2 pounds (0.58 to 0.9 kg)

Distinguishing Characteristics

- Heavy, light yellow, gray or greenish-white body
- Rust-colored strip along length of back
- Black tail tipped with rattles
- Yellow eyes with elliptical or cat-like pupils
- Marked with 20-29 dark, V-shaped crossbars with jagged edges across back

LIFE HISTORY

Range: Upland woods and rocky ridges in the eastern United States; the eastern third of Texas

Diet: Rabbits, squirrels, rats, mice and occasionally birds, other snakes, lizards and frogs

Predators: Coyotes, bobcats, skunks, foxes, hawks and owls and snake-eating snakes such as king snakes, indigo snakes and cottonmouths

Sexual maturity: At three years for males and up to four years for females

Mating season: In early spring; only once every two to three years for females

Eggs: Timber rattlers, like other pit vipers, do not lay eggs. Instead the eggs are kept inside the female's body until the eggs are ready to "hatch."

Incubation: Estimated six months

Young: Litters consist of between five and 20 young, which are 10 to 17 inches long (25 to 43 cm). Young may remain near their mother for seven to ten days after birth, but no parental care is provided.

Life span: Up to ten years

HABITAT

Timber rattlesnakes prefer moist lowland forests and hilly woodlands or thickets near permanent water sources such as rivers, lakes, ponds, streams and swamps where tree stumps, logs and branches provide refuge.

BEHAVIOR

Although *diurnal* (active during the day) during spring and fall, timber rattlesnakes become *nocturnal* (active at night) during the oppressive heat of the summer. They will coil beside a fallen tree or log and wait for their quick-moving prey to pass. Pit vipers can develop an appetite for certain prey—some spend their lives eating only birds or chipmunks while others will eat a variety of foods. Their interest and appetite seems to be shaped by killing a particular prey early in life.

Highly venomous, timber rattlesnakes are sometimes slow to defend themselves and rely on their ability to blend into their surroundings to avoid confrontation. They seek to escape rather than risking danger and will remain silent, and if possible, will hide before revealing their position to a predator. Despite their large size and reputation, they are difficult to provoke into rattling or biting. Still, it does happen. It is best not to take any chances with such a potentially deadly snake. If one is bitten, seek immediate medical attention.

NOW YOU KNOW!

- According to legend, one can tell the age of a rattlesnake by the number of rattles present at the end of its tail. A baby rattlesnake is born with the first segment of its rattle, called a "button." As the snake grows (and with each molting of its outer skin) an additional segment is added to its rattle. Younger snakes shed more often than older snakes, but on average, free-ranging snakes may molt three to six times a year. Another clue to a snake's age is its color: timber rattlers darken as they age, and the darkest are old males.
- The scientific name, *Crotalus horridus*, is formed from two Latin words: *crotalum*, meaning "bell or rattle," and *horridus*, for "dreadful"—which makes reference to its venom.

TIMBER RATTLESNAKES AND PEOPLE

Although many timber rattlers meet their deaths at the hands of people or by automobiles, the fastest way to kill timber rattlesnake populations is by destroying or altering the places they need to hunt, hibernate and live. Today, every state inhabited by timber rattlesnakes has laws protecting the species, including Texas. In Texas, it is listed as a threatened species. This means that people cannot take, transport, have in their possession or sell timber rattlesnakes.