

Timber rattlesnake is largest and most formidable in North America

Throughout the forests of eastern North America, the largest and most formidable venomous snake is the

Timber Rattlesnake (Crotalus horridus). In Pennsylvania the Timber Rattlesnake is widespread in

mountainous areas, and is absent only in the southeastern corner and western edge of the state.

This range is but a remnant of the state-wide distribution of pre-colonial times, documented by rattlesnake

bones recovered from Indian mounds and cave deposits.

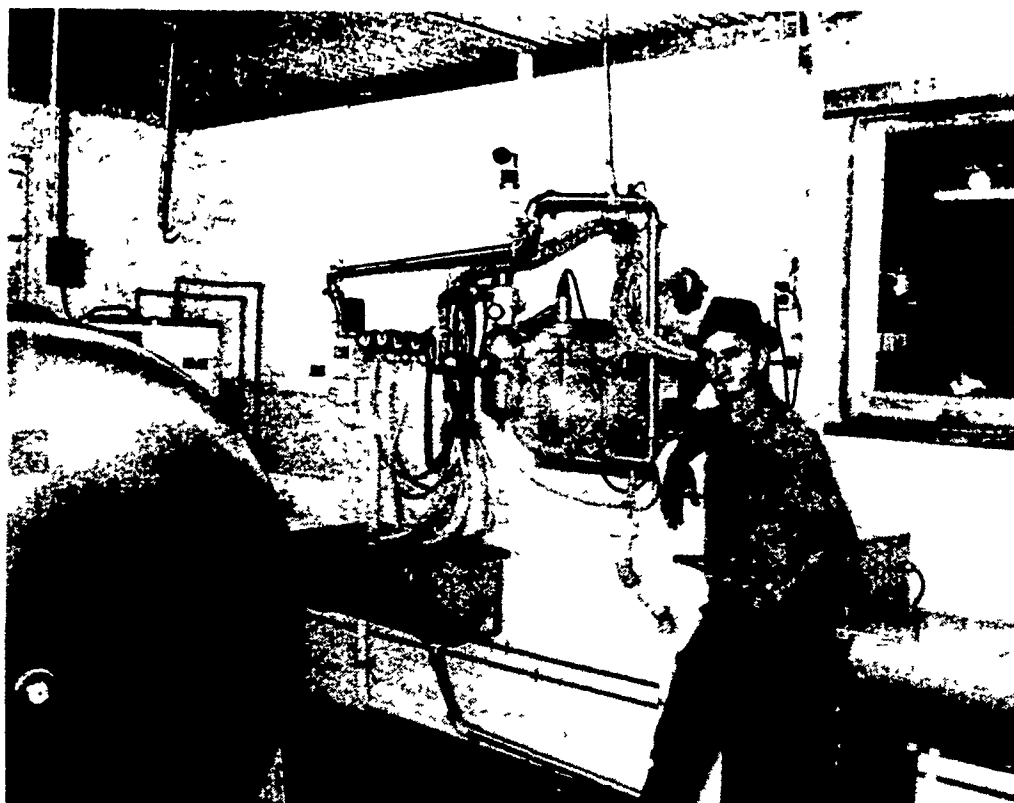
The Timber Rattlesnake needs no introduction to most Pennsylvania outdoorsmen. Its length (up to 60 inches), bulk, and the presence of a rattle are sufficient for identification. The color pattern of dark zigzag crossbands on a yellow or brown background is unique. One popular misconception holds that color and sex are correlated. Yellow and brown color phases do not distinguish males from females, just blonds and brunets. The velvety black tail was noted by early-day woodsmen, who called Timber Rattlesnakes "velvet tails" to distinguish them from rattlesnake species with banded tails.

After leaving the den-site in early summer, the rattlesnakes change their daily cycle. Instead of basking during the day, they avoid the hot summer sun and are active at night. Summer habitats are varied: woodlots, field-edges, stone walls, or stream banks. Rattlesnake movements and locations during the summer are determined by availability of food and water. In early fall the rattlers begin to return to the den-site, where they congregate and repeat the spring basking cycle before finally entering hibernation. This entire seasonal cycle is dependent on temperature, and varies in timing from year to year according to the weather.

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Tom also says, "the Agway installation and service crews are very efficient, and after installation, the servicemen were always prompt in handling any question or problems that came up."

Habitat

Timber Rattlesnake habitat in Pennsylvania is mountain country, the rougher the better. Rattlesnakes usually occur on rocky ridges, most frequently on south-facing slopes. Rock ledges, slides, and talus slopes are characteristic habitats because the rattlers require secure hibernation sites extending below the frost-line.

These "dens" are located in deep fissures and cracks in the rocks, or in deep talus. The snakes congregate in the den area during cool fall weather, then enter the dens and spend the winter months in hibernation.

Activity

The annual cycle of rattlesnake activity begins when they emerge from the den during the first warm days of spring. Rattlesnakes remain in the den area for some time, emerging to bask in the warm sun during the day and retreating into the den to escape cool night-time temperatures. With increasing temperatures of early summer days, the snakes move farther and farther from the den area, and eventually disperse into surrounding countryside.

Reproduction

The Timber Rattlesnake's reproductive cycle is also geared to the seasons. Courtship and mating occur in the spring, near the den-site, while males and females are concentrated. The young, 8 - to 10 - inch exact replicas of the adult, are born at the end of the summer season, in late August or early September. There may be as many as seventeen in a brood, but the usual number is eight to ten. The are born alive, fully equipped with fangs and venom. In northern areas where the warm season is short, the gestation period is long. Gestation is temperature dependent. In birds and mammals, body temperatures remain relatively constant and so do gestation and incubation periods for these animals.

In reptiles and other cold-blooded vertebrates, body temperatures vary with environmental temperatures. Since female rattlesnakes retain eggs within their bodies, the rate at which the eggs develop depends upon the female's body temperature. Her body temperature depends upon environmental temperatures. Because of Pennsylvania's relatively cool climate and the resulting long gestation period, Pennsylvania rattlesnakes bear young only in alternate years.

Rattlesnakes provide no parental care for their young. They are on their own from birth and must independently find their way to a denning site. One theory is that the young find their way to a den by following scent trails of older rattlers.

Food Habits

The principal food of Timber Rattlesnakes is mammals, mostly rodents. Mammals make up between 85 percent and 95 percent of the diet. The remainder is composed of birds, eggs, and occasionally other reptiles. Rattlesnakes are well adapted to their diet of warm-blooded animals. The heat-sensitive pit organ on each side of the head permits them to detect prey, even in the dark. The fangs and venom apparatus are adaptations to catch agile, fast-moving prey. Once the prey is detected and killed, it must be swallowed whole, since snake teeth are needle-like and not adapted for

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