

Timber rattlesnake

The timber rattlesnake doesn't mind sharing its den with its own mates – including other snake species

A large snake that can grow from 127 to 152cm, the timber rattlesnake (*Crotalus horridus*) has markings on its back that disguises it against the ground coverings in which it makes its home. It was initially prevalent across broad areas of the US but it has become threatened. While its range across western US is still large, they are found in isolated populations. Timber rattlesnakes hibernate during the cold winter, taking shelter from September/October to late April or early May. Remarkably the snake will live with many members of its species and, in some instances, with others such as the copperhead or the eastern racer. The snakes are remarkably loyal to their denning sites, returning to the same spot each year.

HABITAT
The timber rattlesnake's preferred habitat is deciduous forests or a conifer forest in rugged terrain. While generally preferring rocky outcrops, if these areas are scarce then the timber rattlesnake can happily survive without them.

Its habitat changes according to its needs, and when pregnant it will leave a densely forested area for an open plain and use rocky outcrops or hollow logs to give birth. It is believed this provides a consistent temperature for the embryo during gestation.

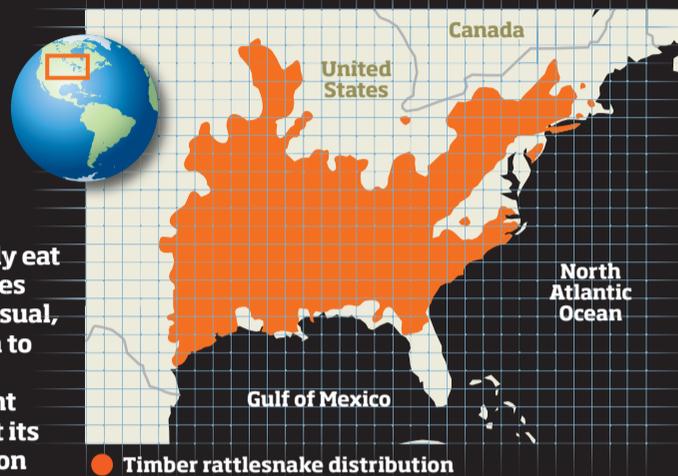
Young snakes have also been seen to climb trees during their development, an unusual behaviour for mature snakes.

DIET

Timber rattlesnakes predominately eat small mammals although this varies according to its habitat. While unusual, in some regions it has been known to eat amphibians and birds.

The timber rattlesnake uses sight and heat detectors to find prey but its sense of smell is the biggest weapon for detecting food. It does not chase its victims, but finds a trail and waits hidden in the undergrowth before attacking. It strikes and bites, allowing its venom to take effect before finding the prey and eating it.

THE RATTLE ZONE



OFFSPRING

Like all rattlesnakes, the timber rattlesnake gives birth to live young. Usually the litter contains between five and 15. Mating occurs in the northern hemisphere's mid-summer, in July and August, but females will not give birth until autumn the following year.

It is thought that the female rattlesnake is able to stop fertilisation of the egg until the end of the hibernation period.

They also reproduce relatively late in life, aged seven to 11 years, and their reproductive cycle repeats every three years making its reproduction rate relatively low. The snake will live for about 20 years in the wild, with females producing from 15 to 45 young during their lifetime.

DOCILE

Despite popular belief, rattlesnakes are fairly docile – preferring to stay motionless or flee, rather than bite.

6km

Male timber rattlesnakes have been known to travel more than 6km during mating season.

DEN

Before numbers declined, it was predicted that denning sites contained between 100 and 200 snakes.

THREATS

The greatest threats to this species are deforestation and loss of habitat, as well as culling by humans.

KIN

Timber rattlesnakes are the only snake species capable of recognising their own family.

WEBSITE:
westmeadenaturalist.org/TimberRattlerFactSheet.pdf

■ This poster complements the Mercury's BBC Earth David Attenborough Wildlife Collection NIE kit. DVD to watch is *Life in Cold Blood: Sophisticated Serpents* (G).

Compiled by Georgina Cook. Image: Getty

