



LIVING WITH WILDLIFE

TIMBER RATTLESNAKES IN MASSACHUSETTS



The timber rattlesnake is the most critically imperiled reptile in Massachusetts. It is found in only five localized, mountainous areas within the Commonwealth. The timber rattlesnake was historically native to at least ten of Massachusetts' 14 counties and has sustained the largest decline of any native reptile in the past 150 years.

DESCRIPTION

Timber rattlesnakes are relatively large, ranging from 35 to 60 inches in length. They are a pit viper (family Viperidae, subfamily Crotalinae) with a prominent tail rattle and heavily keeled scales. Newborn are 7–16 inches long. The back pattern is variable, but may be yellowish or black, or prominently banded with black, chestnut, and mahogany colors. In some individuals, the back pattern may be completely black. The timber rattlesnake has a triangular head and vertical pupils. Timber rattlesnakes avoid people.

DISTRIBUTION

The timber rattlesnake ranges from central New England to northern Florida, and west to Minnesota and Texas.

LIFE HISTORY

Timber rattlesnakes may achieve ages of up to 40 years.

They mature between the ages of 7 and 11 years. Timber rattlesnakes bear live young. Birthing usually occurs in late summer and each litter consists of 5–9 young. In the northern portion of their range—including Massachusetts—timber rattlesnakes give birth on a 2- to 4-year cycle.

FOOD, HABITS, AND HABITAT

The remaining timber rattlesnake populations in Massachusetts are associated with deciduous and mixed pine-oak habitats in unfragmented mountain areas. For Massachusetts populations, overwintering areas—called dens—are usually situated upon, or adjacent to, areas of deep, loose rock piles (talus) associated with cliffs, bedrock crevices, and ledges. Other important habitat features include basking areas, birthing areas, and transitions from forests to fields. Summer activity areas may be located several miles from overwintering dens. Massachusetts timber rattlesnakes usually emerge from overwintering dens in April and bask frequently near the den entrance until mid-May. Longer foraging movements are made throughout the summer. Timber rattlesnakes are sit-and-wait predators that primarily eat rodents, but they may also eat amphibians, snakes, and birds. Timber rattlesnakes return to their underground dens in the autumn and spend approximately six months inactive.

THREATS

As a long-lived vertebrate with low rates of reproduction, northern timber rattlesnake populations are vulnerable to any increases in adult mortality. Remnant rattlesnake populations in Massachusetts are subjected to elevated mortality from a variety of sources, putting the species at risk of disappearing from the state. Threats include habitat loss and fragmentation, road mortality, off-road vehicle and new trail development, targeted and incidental killing, collecting, and harassment, and Snake Fungal Disease. The small remaining populations may also be threatened by a loss of genetic diversity and inbreeding.

CONSERVATION

The timber rattlesnake is listed as endangered per the Massachusetts Endangered Species Act. It is illegal to harass, chase, disturb, capture, harm, or kill a timber rattlesnake in Massachusetts. It is also identified as a species of greatest conservation need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan. In keeping with its mission to conserve and protect the native plants and animals of Massachusetts, MassWildlife is working with partners to save the five remaining timber rattlesnake populations and habitats in Massachusetts. Conservation actions include land protection, discouraging public access to sensitive habitat areas, strengthening law enforcement partnerships, and increased monitoring. At the most critically imperiled sites, steps are being taken to increase juvenile survivorship to help offset unnatural rates of excessive adult mortality.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP

If you are lucky enough to see one of these extremely rare snakes, please let us know! Send an email with any photos and location to natural.heritage@mass.gov.

Support endangered species conservation. Your contribution to the Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Fund directly helps species in need. MassWildlife's Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program depends on donations and grants to continue conservation work throughout the state. Visit mass.gov/supportnhesp to learn more.

TIPS FOR RESIDENTS

Timber rattlesnakes avoid people. Although venomous, they pose no serious threat when left alone. When disturbed, rattlesnakes may create a buzzing-like rattle. Non-venomous snakes may also buzz their tail when surprised.

Signs like the one to the right are posted in areas where people encounter timber rattlesnakes with regularity. In these areas, please stay on the trails. Keep pets leashed and avoid any wildlife—including rattlesnakes—you may encounter.

Did you know?

Endangered Timber Rattlesnakes are native to these mountains.

You may see Timber Rattlesnakes while hiking in this area. These shy animals do not bite unless provoked.



Timber Rattlesnakes range from yellow to brown to grey to black in color. Dark brown or black v-shaped markings run along the back, but can be hard to see on darker snakes.

Rattlesnakes avoid people. Although venomous, they pose no serious threat. When disturbed, rattlesnakes may create a buzzing-like rattle. Non-venomous snakes may also buzz their tail when surprised.

If you are lucky enough to see one of these extremely rare snakes, please let us know! Email natural.heritage@state.ma.us. Get involved by visiting mass.gov/nhesp.

Please stay on the trail.

Keep pets leashed and avoid any wildlife—including rattlesnakes—you may encounter.

In the rare case of a rattlesnake bite, stay calm. Dial 911 and seek immediate medical attention.



Per the Massachusetts Endangered Species Act, it is illegal to harass, chase, disturb, capture, harm, or kill a rattlesnake in Massachusetts.

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Please contact the MA Environmental Police at (800) 632-8075 to report violations.

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Massachusetts

