



## **Timber Rattlesnake (*Crotalus horridus*)**

*Kro-tuh-luss horruh-duss*



*Photo by Sara Viernum*

***\*Venomous; Although Timber rattlesnakes are one of two venomous species in the state of Wisconsin, and have a potent venom, they are also considered a state protected species, restricted to remote areas of the unglaciated Driftless region of southwestern and western Wisconsin. Most, if not all verified bites from this species in the state have occurred when these snakes were formerly historically abundant. These snakes tend to be shy and avoid humans whenever possible. Most venomous snakebites occur when attempting to handle, molest, or harass the animal or when accidentally stepped on. Knowing and maintaining adequate levels of awareness in areas where venomous species may occur, and acting accordingly will greatly reduce negative human-snake encounters.***

**Description:** 36 to 54 inches on average. The timber rattlesnake is a large, heavily bodied pit viper with strongly keeled scales. Ground color ranges from yellow, yellowish-orange, tan, brown, to gray or grayish brown with wide, darker brown to black chevron shaped cross banding bordered with white. There is also often a reddish, to rust-orange dorsal or vertebral stripe as well. The tail tends to be black, and the multi segmented rattle usually light colored. The head is broad and triangular, and is usually unpatterned except for two small pencil point dots and a pair of dark post ocular stripes. Loreal pits are also evident. The belly is cream colored, pinkish, to pale yellow with scattered dark blotches and markings.

Scales: Keeled

Anal Plate: Undivided

**Taxonomy and Classification:**

**Life:** All living, physical, and animate entities

**Domain:** Eukaryota

**Kingdom:** Animalia

**Phylum:** Chordata/Vertebrata

**Class:** Reptilia

**Order:** Squamata

**Suborder:** Serpentes

**Infraorder:** Alethinophidia

**Family:** Viperidae

**Subfamily:** Crotalinae

**Genus:** Crotalus

**Species:** *Crotalus horridus*\*

*\*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

**Similar/Confusing Species:** Eastern massasaugas (*Sistrurus catenatus*), the other of Wisconsin's two venomous snake species, tends to generally be smaller, and possess large scutes atop the head/crown. All other species of harmless and non-venomous snakes in Wisconsin lack rattles, loreal heat pits, and have two rows of sub-caudal scales.

**Etymology:** Crotalus- Crotalum (bell, little bell, castanet, or rattle). horridus-dreadful, bristly, or rough.

**Subspecies:** None.

**Range & Habitat:** In Wisconsin, timber rattlesnakes occupy primarily the unglaciated "driftless" area of western and southwestern portions of the state along the Wisconsin and Mississippi rivers. Timber rattlesnakes are characteristic of the steep, rugged, and remote bluffs, valleys, and surrounding forests and fields within this range.

**Habits & Natural History:** The timber rattlesnake is a large, heavy bodied rattlesnake that was once

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formerly very abundant historically in western and southwestern Wisconsin. However, due to bounties placed on rattlesnakes from the early to mid-1900's, as well as outright persecution, habitat loss and fragmentation, their numbers have declined greatly. Timber rattlesnakes emerge from their communal dens (where they often may be found in association with other snake species) in May and June, where seasonal movements and habits vary depending on the age, gender, and reproductive status of individual snakes. Males, juveniles, and non-gravid females disperse into the surrounding forests and fields for the summer before returning to dens in September, while gravid females tend to remain closer to dens throughout the year, where they often do so communally. Unlike most snakes, Timber rattlesnakes undergo a very slow sexual maturity rate of 8 to 10 years, and produce relatively small broods. As with other rattlesnakes, timber rattlesnakes are viviparous, or live bearing. These, factors, along with newly emerging snake fungal disease (SFD) affecting Wisconsin populations of timber rattlesnakes and other species, are only a few reasons why this species requires protection and conservation in the state. Although a large and medically significant species, being the larger of the two venomous snakes found in Wisconsin, timber rattlesnakes prefer to avoid human contact and tends not to be an aggressive species when encountered. Only one recorded fatality has been attributed in Wisconsin since 1900.

**Phenology:** Timber rattlesnakes emerge from overwintering as early as early to mid May, and remain active throughout the year through late September or October (or even later into the year if warmer temperatures persist or otherwise permit).

**Conservation Status:** WI "Protected Wild Animal". Regulated by the WI DNR. IUCN Red List Least Concern (LC).

### **Contact**

Authored by Eric Roscoe. For any additional questions, comments, and/or concerns regarding this species, group of species, or this informational sheet, please email and contact the Madison Area Herpetological Society at [info@madisonherps.org](mailto:info@madisonherps.org)

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