

Canebrake (a.k.a. Timber) Rattlesnake

Crotalus horridus

Upland Snake Species Profile

Venomous



Name Game

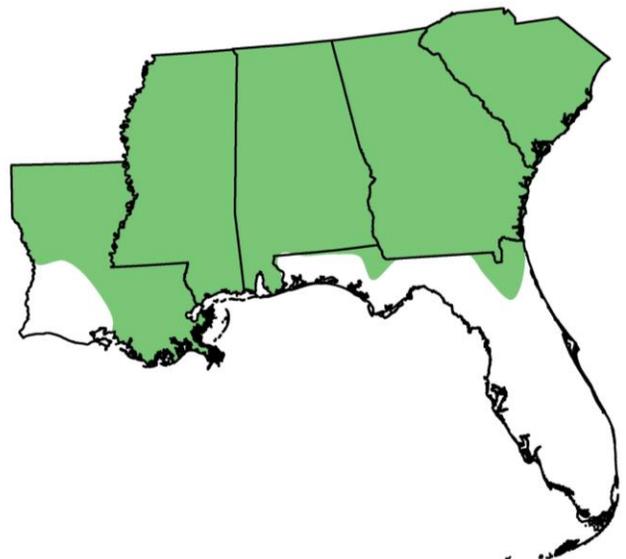
The genus, *Crotalus*, roughly translates to “rattle”. The species epithet, *horridus*, means “frightful”.

Natural History: Canebrake rattlesnakes are pit-vipers that belong to the family Viperidae. They are ambush predators and may spend several weeks in the same location waiting to strike at a potential meal. Adults typically feed on rodents, such as chipmunks, rats, mice, voles, and squirrels. In addition to sight and smell, rattlesnakes have a loreal pit that allows them to detect infrared radiation which is useful in locating warm-blooded prey in low light conditions. Rattlesnakes use their potent venom when they strike and release prey, and their forked-tongue to follow envenomated prey. Canebrake rattlesnakes are most frequently observed during mating season in the fall. Females exhibit delayed fertilization and will give birth to 6 to 18 live young during the following summer. In the Southeastern Coastal Plain, canebrakes may go into torpor for several weeks in the winter, but generally do not follow the overwintering denning and hibernation behavior of northern populations.

Range and Appearance: This species ranges from New England through North Florida, and westward to central Texas and southern Minnesota. In the northern portion of their range, they are referred to as timber rattlesnakes and in the southern portion of the range they are often called canebrake rattlesnakes. Both names refer to the same species, although there are color differences that vary latitudinally. With the exception of nearly jet-black animals which occur in the Northeast, this species has a series of brown chevrons that extend the length of the body. They have keeled scales and the base color can be brown, greenish-gray, or creamy-yellow. Individuals in the southeast may have a pink hue. Canebrakes often have a brown stripe that runs down the middle of their back, a characteristic not present in northern populations. Neonates (newborn snakes) have similar color patterns as adults. Exceptionally large canebrakes can measure over 8 feet, but most adult animals range between 4 to 6 feet in length.

Rattlesnake Myth

Rattlesnakes grow a new rattle segment during each shed cycle. Counting the number of rattles will tell you how many times a snake has shed, not how old the snake is.



Upland Snake
Conservation Initiative

www.gophertortoiseconservation.org

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Conservation Challenges and Threats:

Rattlesnakes are often killed on sight and historically dens have been gassed and systematically wiped out. This has resulted in their decline, especially in the northern portion of their range. Canebrake rattlesnakes are habitat generalists but are still vulnerable to habitat loss and degradation. As a migratory species, timber rattlesnakes are highly susceptible to road mortality.

Snake Vocabulary

Loreal pit: An organ located between the eye and nostril (see picture below) that allows rattlesnakes to view their surroundings and prey in infrared.



Venom: Rattlesnake venom is used for feeding and defense. Canebrake rattlesnake venom is highly evolved and varies extensively throughout the species range. There are multiple types of venom patterns associated with this species: Type A is neurotoxic and can lead to nervous system failure, Type B is hemorrhagic and can cause severe bleeding and tissue scarring, Type C is the least common and is the least potent. Some canebrake populations have a combination of Type A and B venoms. Venom has several benefits in the biomedical field; venom research has led to medical uses to treat cancer, high blood pressure, kidney stones, strokes, and diabetes.

Created by Bradley O'Hanlon and Jennifer Howze
Photographs provided by Jennifer Howze and Bradley O'Hanlon
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This rattlesnake (pictured above) has 9 rattle segments. The tip of the rattle is often missing on older animals.

Rattlesnake Safety: Snakes should never be handled if the species cannot be positively identified. Most snake bites occur when individuals attempt to harass or kill a venomous snake. When hiking in potential rattlesnake habitat, stay on trails, wear closed-toe boots, and always keep dogs on a leash. A cell phone and car keys are the best "snake bite kit" – dial 911 and seek immediate medical assistance. Never attempt to suck the venom from a bite or attempt to tie a tourniquet around the affected area. A manicured lawn and tidy yard will reduce the chances of encountering a rattlesnake around a home. If a rattlesnake is encountered in a yard, and is not posing an immediate risk to family or pets, the best solution is to let the snake leave on its own.

For More Information:

Ernst C. H. and E. M. Ernst. 2012. *Venomous Reptiles of the United States, Canada, and Northern Mexico. Volume 2 Crotalus.* Johns Hopkins University Press.

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Martin, W. H., D. J. Stevenson, and P. B. Spivey. 2008. Timber Rattlesnake. Pp. 433-436, *In* J. Jensen, C. Camp, W. Gibbons, and M. Elliot (Eds.). *The Amphibians and Reptiles of Georgia.* The University of Georgia Press, Athens, GA.

The Gopher Tortoise Council. Minimizing conflict with venomous snakes. Available at www.gophertortoisecouncil.com/edu/snakeinitiative.php