

“Timber Rattlesnake and the Eastern Rat Snake”

by Sally Cureton

Last month I wrote about two of the common snakes in this area, the Eastern Copperhead and the garter snake. There are two others that are commonly found here - the **Timber Rattlesnake** and the **Eastern Rat Snake**, formerly known as the black rat snake. The Timber Rattlesnake or *Crotalus horridus* (Latin for “dreadful”) can grow to be 36 to 72 inches long. It has dark blotches and wavy cross bands, with a yellowish or black dorsal ground color. Its favorite habitats are rocky hillsides, fields bordered by forests, river valleys and low pinewoods. These snakes will gather together during the fall and spend the winter in deep crevices of rock outcrops. Sometimes they can be found in stump holes or under various surface coverings. Females give birth to 3-13 live young.

When discovered the Timber Rattlesnake will usually remain still or attempt to escape. If it is “rattling” it is scared and is warning you to back off. However, it will vigorously defend themselves when aggravated. These snakes occupy a definite place in our forests and should be left undisturbed when found on a hiking trail or in the woods. Small mammals, especially rodents, are their primary food source.

As with the copperhead snake, the danger this reptile poses has been misunderstood. More humans are killed by stinging insects than by timber rattlers, as their bite is rarely fatal. Frankly, I have been hiking in these mountains for over 30 years and have yet to encounter one of these snakes.

The other snake commonly found here is the Rat Snake. Its average length is 42 to 72 inches making it the largest snake in Virginia. It is mostly black with a white chin and belly, and is a powerful constrictor. Once it catches its prey, it will wrap its body around it and squeeze until the animal suffocates. In the winter it will often hibernate in a den with other species such as the copperhead. Rat snakes are typically found in forest, fields, marshes and farmland. It is a skillful climber and will climb high in trees to find prey. It will also hide in old woodpecker holes.

A female Rat snake lays eggs, generally 5 to 30. Each egg is approximately two inches long and will be under a rotten log, a rock or a pile of dead leaves. The baby snakes are about 12 inches long when they hatch. As the name suggests, these snakes are rodent control specialists and are quite beneficial to have around.

Currently several of Virginia’s snakes are considered rare and one, the canebrake rattlesnake, is protected under Virginia’s Endangered Species Act. Destruction of habitat, pollution and deforestation has caused a significant reduction in their numbers. By state regulation, even non-endangered snakes cannot be killed unless they are a nuisance or health hazard. Unless you have

no reasonable alternative but to kill a snake, it should be left alone. It will gladly head back into the quiet woods.

The bear or bears seem to be either back or still here. Remember to be sure to bring in any bird feeders and keep garbage cans secure. Bears have been sighted from Massanutten Drive below the gap, up to Palmer and Ranier Roads in the Kettle.

Happy gardening and wildlife viewing!