

Frequently Asked Questions

The Timber Rattlesnake (*Crotalus horridus*) in Brown County State Park

One of the only places in Indiana that you might find the Timber Rattlesnake is at Brown County State Park (BCSP). One of the important purposes of our state parks in Indiana is to conserve pieces of original Indiana, which helps maintain biological diversity and provides Hoosiers with opportunities to see and understand the natural history of our state. That conservation includes trees, wildflowers, mammals, birds...and snakes, too. This FAQ provides some basic information about the Timber Rattlesnake, which is one of the venomous snakes found in the park and is also one of the most misunderstood species in the park.



1. What is the status of the Timber Rattlesnake in Indiana?

Timber Rattlesnakes are considered a state endangered species. There are concerns regarding population declines for this species across most of its entire range.

2. How large is the rattlesnake and what morphologic (form, structure, color) types are found?

Timber Rattlesnakes are heavy-bodied vipers that can reach up to 6 feet in length at maturity. Rattlesnakes found in Brown County are predominately yellow or brown in color. It is rare to find a black color phase in the state.

3. Where do Timber Rattlesnakes live?

Timber Rattlesnakes prefer a habitat of dry, rocky ridge-tops of mature oak-hickory. These forested areas are typically interspersed with small openings that help in thermoregulation, gestation, and ecdysis (shedding). Timber rattlers tend to avoid manicured openings. In areas where rattlesnakes are present on BCSP property, human activity centers are typically kept mowed and cleared of woody debris.

4. How do Timber Rattlesnakes reproduce?

These reptiles are ovo-viviparous. The young are gestated internally in small membranous eggs. At parturition, eggs are released and the neonates (young snakes) immediately emerge. Females do not breed on an annual basis and become sexually mature at ~5-6 years of age; they typically produce 10-12 offspring every 3-5 years.

5. What do Timber Rattlesnakes eat?

The snake feeds primarily on small mammals and birds. Work done within BCSP has shown this species feeding primarily on eastern chipmunks, gray squirrels, and various birds.

6. Where do Timber Rattlesnakes over-winter?

Ten hibernacula (dens) have been identified on BCSP property. Other hibernacula are known to exist but their locations remain unknown. Hibernacula are mainly in undisturbed portions of the park and efforts are made to keep local disturbance to a minimum.

7. When is the Timber Rattlesnake breeding season?

Timber Rattlesnakes typically breed in July and August. During this time, males will begin searching for mates and can become more susceptible to human encounters. BCSP staff have developed protocols for dealing with snake sightings and encourage conservation behavior with the public. We temporarily remove the snake from its location. At a later date, the snake is released close to the capture point. This is done to limit long distance translocation of Timber Rattlesnakes. These snakes are intimately habituated to their hibernacula and return year after year. If a snake is moved too far from a home range, it could result in over-winter mortality.

8. How many Timber Rattlesnakes have been found in Brown County State Park?

One hundred and fifteen rattlesnakes have been marked in BCSP (52 male, 34 female, 29 unknown sex). Each snake was implanted with a Passive Integrated Transponder (PIT tag) and morphologic measurements taken. As snakes are recaptured, it is possible to determine their previous location and growth rate.

9. Has anyone ever been bitten by a Timber Rattlesnake at Brown County State Park?

Although encounters do occur, no visitor has been bitten by a timber rattlesnake in the park in the last 30 years.

10. What can I do to avoid contact with a Timber Rattlesnake?

Although the thought of encountering a Timber Rattlesnake is frightening to most people, the opportunity to see one in the wild is really a rare occurrence. When you hike, stay on existing trails, and keep an eye on where you're walking. Don't roll logs, put your hands on rock outcrops or pick up materials from the ground without looking first. In picnic areas and campgrounds, wear shoes and again, keep an eye on where you're walking. If you do see a Timber Rattlesnake, back away and find an alternative route. In most cases, Timber Rattlesnakes remain still, waiting for mice, squirrels and chipmunks to come close. They are not usually aggressive unless provoked. Don't poke at the snake or try to catch it. Report its location to the park office or nature center.

11. How can I find out more about venomous snakes in Indiana?

Pick up a copy of the brochure called Common Snakes of Indiana State Parks and Reservoirs at the nature center or access it online at http://www.in.gov/dnr/parklake/files/snakes_parklake.pdf. A great online resource for Indiana herptiles (snakes, turtles, etc.) is the IPFW Center for Reptile and Amphibian Conservation Management at <http://herpcenter.ipfw.edu/Index.htm>.

An image of a rattlesnake and the phrase "Don't Tread on Me" have long been a part of our history in the United States and have served as a symbol of freedom and of the independent spirit of our people. Thanks for helping us to protect this native species and that symbolism through understanding, observation and management.



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