

## Snake, Rattle, and Role

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“Snake!” To many people, snakes evoke fear and dread. Such reactions have bad consequences for snakes, people, and the environment. All snakes in New Hampshire are important in the ecosystem: they help to control rodent and insect populations, they are an important prey food for larger animals, they add to biological diversity, and they often serve as indicators of healthy ecosystems. Their absence from traditional habitats is a cause for concern.

Almost all snakes in New Hampshire are non-venomous. In fact, all are non-venomous except one, the timber rattlesnake. The timber rattler is very rare, in fact, it is critically imperiled, and is protected by law. The only known population is in the Lamprey River landscape. Most snakes, including timber rattlers, are not aggressive to people and have no reason to be so unless they are provoked. They are most often observed resting in a sunny spot.



Photo by Brendan Clifford.

[http://www.wildlife.state.nh.us/Wildlife/Nongame/snakes/profile\\_timber\\_rattlesnake.htm](http://www.wildlife.state.nh.us/Wildlife/Nongame/snakes/profile_timber_rattlesnake.htm)

New Hampshire has several snake species that appear to be mostly black: timber rattle snake, northern water snake, and black racer. Even the rattle can cause confusion: other snakes can produce a rattle sound by twitching dry leaves with the tail, but the timber rattler is the only one with a true rattle at the end of its tail. Timber rattlesnakes are 36 to 60 inches long and have a large, triangular head. The scales have keels, so the snake has a rough appearance. When in doubt, keep a good distance away from the snake. If a timber rattlesnake is accidentally disturbed and bites a person or pet, remain calm. Many bites are actually dry and do not contain any venom. Wet bites are painful, but are not likely to result in death, even if left untreated. Do not cut or suck the wound. Remove jewelry or collars near the wound. Seek medical attention, especially if a pet is bitten on the face; the venom might cause swelling in the nasal passages.

Many snakes are still common in New Hampshire, but all snakes suffer losses from encounters with cars, loss of habitat to development, and human fears that lead to deliberate killing. The best response to fear is education. The more we know about snakes, the less we have to fear, and the better we can protect these interesting and important animals. The best role we can play in assuring a positive future for snakes is to leave them alone.