

Town of Marlborough



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RATTLESNAKE INFORMATION FOR RESIDENTS

Dear Resident,

June 2019

We are writing to provide you with information about the timber rattlesnake so that you will know what to expect and do should you happen to encounter one. You may know that the rattlesnake is listed as “Endangered” in the State of Connecticut, and the DEEP is committed to protecting both the public from this venomous snake and the snake from the public by means of warning signs, area closures, conservation officer, public lectures, outreach, area cooperators (who pick up nuisance snakes), and information letters like this one.

Rattlesnakes are passive animals. They will not attack humans or their pets. If directly threatened or molested, the snake may strike in self-defense, although initially it will coil up in a defensive posture and vibrate its tail with bony segments at its end to produce a loud buzz.

Rattlesnakes are forest residents, but due to the fragmenting of large forest tracts in parts of East and South Glastonbury, the snake can be encountered crossing roads and yards.

Here are some facts. Rattlesnakes overwinter beneath the frost line in communal dens. They begin moving away from their winter dens in May, returning in late September or early October. The first hard frost tells a rattlesnake “return to den”, which it can accomplish in one night from a mile away. However, there is a window of time within this 5-month active period when one is most likely to meet a rattlesnake. From late June to late August males are super-active in search of receptive females, i.e. the height of the mating season. In fact, there are just two kinds of activities that may lead to encountering a rattlesnake, males looking for females and both sexes hunting for food.

How does this get the snake in trouble with people? Rattlesnakes feed primarily on small rodents. The white-footed mouse is the principal food of these snakes. Mice use logs as runways. Typically, and always at night, a mouse scampers along the top of a log. The rattlesnake, coiled up against the log, head level with top, detects the mouse with its two infrared heat-detectors embedded between the eye and nostril openings. It locks on to the mouse’s body heat, like a sidewinder missile does to a jet, and tracks the mouse. At the instant it is within range, the snake strikes and envenomates it. The mouse staggers off and dies a short distance away. The snake follows, picks it up and consumes it whole. If the snake fails to catch a mouse on a given night, it moves to the next log. Repeating this process. We attached a transmitter to a female rattlesnake, about three feet in length, and followed her for 31 days. She changed hunting



location about once per day, averaging 90 feet per move. Sometimes, this “hop-scotching” through the woods, log-to-log behavior, brings the snake to a road, or a yard.

A note about rattlesnake venom. It has two main uses, to kill, and digest the prey. The venom contains enzymes that break down red tissue. Once injected, the venom works along with the snake’s gut enzymes to digest the mouse. The venom digests from within, and once the body is readied by this action (remember that the snake swallowed the mouse whole), the snake’s digestive enzymes finish the job. Venom is rarely used in defense.

What do these observations mean for you if you see one in your yard? Very likely it is changing hunting locations, looking for a new feeding site. Unless it detects mice at your woodpile or shed, it will continue moving and you won’t see the snake again. If you are comfortable with its temporary presence, you can leave it alone, and it will most likely crawl off to continue its foraging routine. No doubt you will want to take pictures of this amazing snake. That will be easy, even if it is moving, because rattlesnakes are slow-pokes out in the open, one of the reasons they are so vulnerable crossing roads. The snake does not attack, but naturally, you’ll give it plenty of room. While we cannot say what is a minimum safe distance for observing a rattlesnake?, keep in mind that a large snake could strike out to about 3 feet from its body. If you are not comfortable with the snake’s presence, please call one of the following who are trained in catching rattlesnakes and have the equipment for removing them. They will be examined by an expert (measured, microchipped) and released back, deep in the forest.

Glastonbury Animal Control (ACO): 633-8301 (if no answer, call police dispatch 860-652-7500)

DEEP dispatch who will contact the conservation officer assigned to the area: 860-424-3333

Jim Chapman, an East Glastonbury resident experienced in handling rattlesnakes: 860-778-8409

Dan McCarthy, an experienced State Police Officer and East Glastonbury resident: 860-614-1416

Jay Kehoe, Director of Public Safety in Marlborough – 860-990-1295

Please report dead rattlesnakes to any of the above who will retrieve the carcass. We can still obtain important information from the dead snake, and if in reasonable condition, it will be preserved and transferred to the American Museum of Natural History for future study

We hope you found this letter helpful. If you have questions, please call the CT DEEP Wildlife Division at 424-3011 where you will be able to speak with a knowledgeable person.

Many residents receiving this letter will be new to the area. We need to advise that the timber rattlesnake is defined and listed as an “Endangered Species” in the state of Connecticut (State Reg. Sec. 26-306-4). We also advise against trying to capture a rattlesnake.

We’ll end on a quote we like from a rattlesnake researcher, Thomas Maigret, University of Kentucky, *“The Timber rattlesnakes may be the most docile, calm animals of their size in eastern US forests. On several occasions, I’ve witnessed spiders using a rattlesnake as an anchor for a web. Females, especially, move very infrequently, and pose almost no threat to a careful human”* (Zoe Gentes, Ecological Society of America, posted in phys.org on 3 January 2019).