

# Tiverton's Timber Rattlesnakes, Fact and Fiction

Timber rattlesnakes may be gone from Tiverton, but their lore lives on. Tiverton was the last known refuge of these impressive reptiles in Rhode Island. Their habitat was an area bordered by Bulgarmarsh, Brayton, Lafayette, and Main Roads, as well as in the woods south of Lafayette Road -- in short, along Pocasset Ridge. Eastern timber rattlesnakes are relatively timid and do not rattle or strike unless disturbed. They bask on sunny, rock-strewn slopes and hunt from May to October.

Being cold-blooded, they return to the same frost-free dens each year for six months of huddled hibernation. A 1929 account by S.N.F. Sanford described this ideal Tiverton snake habitat: "a long ridge of granitic rocks much broken and containing numerous crevices and dens. This ridge is heavily wooded ...and the countryside is sparsely populated."

According to Ted Levin in his 2016 book, "America's Snake: The Rise and Fall of the Timber Rattlesnake," rattlesnakes are the most highly evolved of reptiles, a member of the pit viper family.

Heat-sensitive facial pits between each eye and nostril enable them to sense minute thermal changes in the infra-red range that indicate warm-blooded prey or landscape features. The base of its rattle, called the matrix, is the living end of the snake's tail. It is made of keratin, the same substance as our fingernails. When the snake sheds, the old matrix is retained to become the newest segment of the rattle. The largest rattlers may have ten or more segments, but these are fragile and can easily break off. The warmer the snake, the faster its muscles can shake the rattle.

Reproduction is slow and infrequent, particularly in the northeast. A female does not bear her first young until she is almost a decade old, and reproduces after that only at three- to five- year intervals. She bears her young alive (ovoviviparous), six to ten extremely vulnerable snakelets.

Several long-time residents of the area remember visiting Frank Manchester's display of caged rattlers in the 1950's. A bounty system throughout New England, and the demand from zoos and collectors, greatly diminished the population. Mr. Manchester, a famous Tiverton snake hunter, estimated that he'd killed 1,200-1,500 rattlers in his lifetime. (The photo here of Frank Manchester is courtesy of The Nature Conservancy RI archives.) Naturalist John Breen, who observed the Tiverton colony over eight years in the 1960's, noted that upwards of 50 were killed in a season early in the decade. In 1963 he published an article in the Narragansett Naturalist marveling at "the presence of rattlesnakes in fair numbers" given their persecution. However, in a later article for Massachusetts Audubon, "Rhode Island's Declining Rattlers," he pointed out the scarcity of baby rattlesnakes from the very beginning, and only two juveniles and no pregnant females reported by any collector during his eight years of study. He concluded that "this could be the eleventh hour of survival for the timber rattlesnake in Rhode Island," citing their isolation and inbreeding as a possible reason.



Frank Manchester & Rattlesnake circa 1950, Bulgarmarsh Road  
photo courtesy of Milton Pearce and Family

The last documented sighting of a Tiverton rattlesnake was in 1966, when a state trooper shot a large one on Lafayette Road. Scattered reports since then are undocumented by photos or specimen samples, according to Christopher Raithel, naturalist for RI DEM. There are only six or seven places in New England where rattlers are still seen, including the Blue Hills of Massachusetts. They have been extirpated from Canada, Maine, and Rhode Island, and are nearly extinct in New Hampshire. If you have any rattles or snakeskins from the Tiverton colony, Raithel would like to analyze the DNA. He will return them to you undamaged. Please contact him at [christopher.raithel@dem.ri.gov](mailto:christopher.raithel@dem.ri.gov).

And don't be disappointed -- according to Raithel, you may still see other reptiles and amphibians on Pocasset Ridge in the warm months, possibly including milk snakes, ribbon snakes, ring-necked snakes, black racers, spotted and marble salamanders, wood frogs and gray tree frogs. None are poisonous.