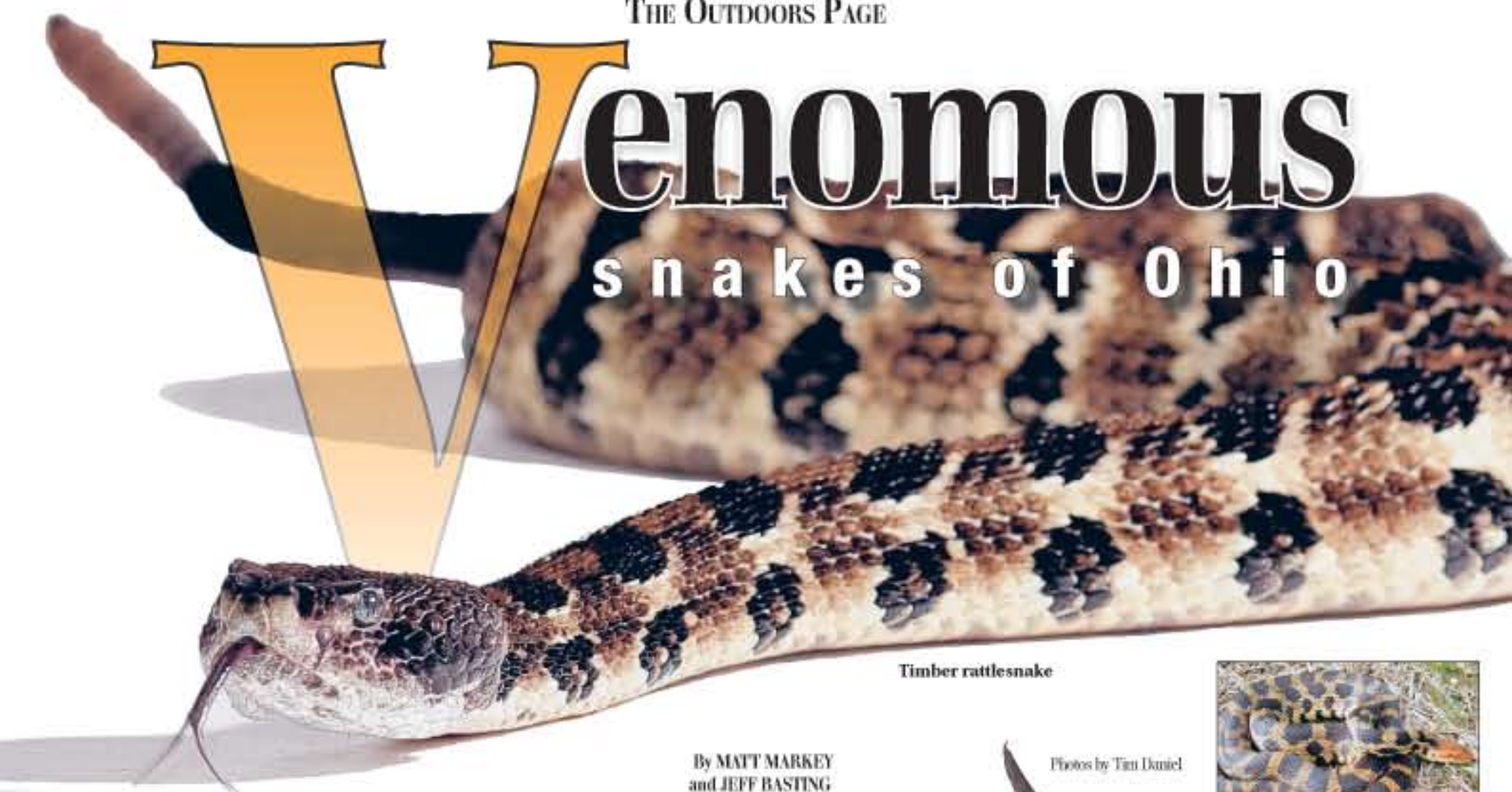


THE OUTDOORS PAGE

Venomous snakes of Ohio



Timber rattlesnake

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The nonvenomous fox snake is often mistaken for a copperhead.

Timber rattlesnake



The timber rattler can be found in a yellow or brown pattern.



PHOTO COURTESY OF GDMR

Massasaugas will usually avoid open water.

Massasauga rattlesnake



Copperhead snake

Copperheads will use a wide range of habitats.

Timber rattlers are the largest of Ohio's three venomous snake species.



1. Adams
2. Scioto
3. Pike
4. Ross
5. Hocking
6. Vinton
7. Jackson
8. Gallia

The eastern massasauga rattlesnake is an inhabitant of wetlands and swampy areas, thus earning the nickname of "swamp rattler." Averaging just 24 to 30 inches in length, it is one of the smallest rattlesnakes in the world.

The massasauga has a thick body, a triangular or heart-shaped head, and is very cryptically colored, usually gray or light brown, with large patches of darker brown on its back.

It is a slow-moving and very reclusive snake, preferring to sit in heavy cover and wait for its prey, which consists of amphibians, small mammals, and insects. The massasauga feeds in the early morning, late afternoon, or at night.

It is very rare throughout its range in Ohio. "People probably are not going to see these snakes, even if they are there," said Brian Banbury, a former instructor in herpetology at Hocking College who now works for the Ohio Division of Wildlife. "When we do find them, the neighbors in the area didn't even know they were there."

Mr. Banbury said massasaugas are usually found in conjunction with chimney crayfish, and will use the mud chimneys for hibernation sites. They will also hibernate in hillsides and old roothall sites.

Massasaugas were historically found in much of the glaciated areas of Ohio, but because of habitat loss, their colonies today are limited to scattered bogs, swamps, and wet prairies. Instances of bites by massasaugas are highly unusual, and although the massasauga's venom is more toxic than that of most rattlesnakes, the amount delivered is very small, and some bites contain no venom at all.

The massasauga is Michigan's only venomous snake, and is found only in localized populations in the Lower Peninsula.



1. Warren
2. Clark
3. Champaign
4. Wyandot
5. Licking
6. Wayne
7. Trumbull
8. Ashtabula

The northern copperhead earned its name with its reddish or copper-colored head and ruddy-brown, coppery body with brown bands. These snakes reach about 30 inches in length.

The copperhead is the most widespread and most frequently encountered of Ohio's three venomous snakes. Copperheads are found throughout the unglaciated regions of Ohio, and prefer to dwell in rocky, wooded hillsides.

"Until the mid-1900s, they were found as far north as Ashland County, but there have been no positive IDs in that area in years," Brian Banbury said. "Now, it is found predominantly in the hill country of southern Ohio."

Mr. Banbury said this snake is not aggressive, but will strike as a defensive mechanism. The bite is very painful, but only a tiny amount of venom is injected and deaths from copperhead bites are extremely rare.

"People sometimes confuse aggression with venomous — water snakes are extremely aggressive and I've even had them chase me, but they are not venomous, they are just a mean snake," he said. "Copperheads and other venomous snakes don't know they are venomous, because nobody ever told them. That's just the gift they have been given to get their prey."

Copperheads are primarily nocturnal in the summer months, spending most of the day in hiding. They will prey on small rodents, lizards, frogs, and insects at night.

The northern copperhead is one of five subspecies of copperhead, and it ranges from northern Georgia and Alabama to Massachusetts, and as far west as Illinois.



1. Adams
2. Scioto
3. Jackson
4. Vinton
5. Hocking
6. Athens
7. Meigs
8. Washington

The eastern timber rattlesnake is found in very low numbers in Ohio, in less than a dozen counties in the southern portion of the state. These snakes prefer sections of remote forest in dry, hilly country where they prey on a range of small animals, including squirrels, mice, other small rodents, and birds.

Timber rattlers average 3 to 5 feet in length, and are found in either a yellow phase pattern with dark brown or black bands and a yellow or brown head, or in a black phase that is blackish brown with crossbands and a black head.

Timber rattlers were historically found in a much larger area throughout the state, and on the Lake Erie Islands, according to Kristin Stanford, who coordinates the Lake Erie watersnake recovery program for Ohio Sea Grant. Habitat loss to development has drastically reduced their numbers in Ohio. The remaining colonies are believed to be widely scattered.

Timber rattlers will seek out openings in the canopy to bask in the sun, and will den or overwinter in deep rock crevices.

They possess a mild disposition and prefer remaining hidden to confrontations with humans. Brian Banbury of the Ohio Division of Wildlife said encounters with timber rattlers are very rare throughout the state.

"We never say never, since those snakes were once spread throughout a wider region and there could be remnant pockets, but concerns are extremely minimal," he said. "I have never stumbled upon one in many years of hunting, fishing, and hiking in Ohio."



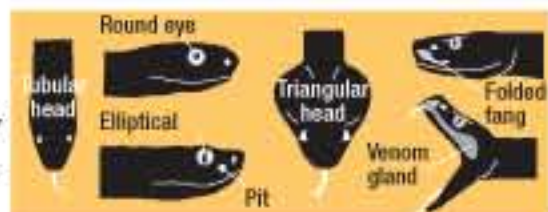
This snake adds a segment to its rattle each time it sheds its skin.



The copperhead's bite is painful, but rarely lethal.

Nonvenomous vs. Venomous

Nonvenomous snakes have heads no wider than their bodies, round eyes, and no pit for sensing heat.



Venomous snakes usually have triangular heads, elliptical eyes, folding fangs, and a heat-sensing pit between the eye and nostril.

Venomous vs. poisonous

Ohio's timber rattlers, massasauga rattlers and copperhead snakes are venomous, not poisonous. Both venomous and poisonous animals (and plants) produce a toxin, but it is delivered differently. Venom is usually injected by fangs or stingers. Poison has

to be ingested or come in contact with the skin to cause damage. Venom is either neurotoxic, attacking the nervous system and brain, or hemotoxic, which affects the blood and organs. Neurotoxic bites are the most deadly. Ohio's venomous snakes are hemotoxic.

● Ohio — poisonous: poison ivy, hickory tussock moth caterpillar (causes rash, swelling and nausea).
● Ohio — venomous: bees, bald-faced hornets, catfish (venom on stingers).