

Hunter Ethics

In Pennsylvania, the timber rattlesnake is a candidate for the endangered or threatened species list while in the rest of its range, including all of our surrounding states, the timber rattlesnake is already listed as threatened or endangered. The fate of this impressive creature depends on the actions of all of us. We are all stewards of our wild lands and forests and need to do our very best to ensure that the timber rattlesnake can be observed by generations to come.

In the Commonwealth every year, there are many individuals applying for a venomous snake permit for the first time and who have no previous timber rattlesnake hunting experience. With this in mind, we have put together this piece to give ethical and practical guidance to all those seeking out timber rattlesnakes and other snake species. This information has been gathered from some of the most experienced snake hunters/enthusiasts, conservation officers, and researchers in the state. Hopefully after reading this you will have a better idea about the do's and don'ts that are practiced by experienced snake enthusiasts.

Many new permit holders and most of the general public think of snake hunting as being characterized by the hunts for bounty and for the slaughter of rattlesnakes as practiced in the Southern and Western parts of the United States. Whether an organized hunt or not, it is important that permit holders and others have the correct perception of what a timber rattlesnake hunt should be. In Pennsylvania, a snake hunt is intended to be a learning experience that results in an appreciation of the most sought species, usually the timber rattlesnake, and in the educational opportunity provided by the up close viewing and inspection of captured snakes. Snake hunts provide the chance to see a creature which many people never observe in their entire lifetime. It is important to remember that many of the largest specimens of timber rattlesnakes and other species captured will have taken twenty to twenty-five years to reach their great size, and therefore should be treated with respect for their achievement.

Below are some of the ethical practices used by experienced persons when hunting and working with snakes.

- Rocks are never moved or lifted – snakes are captured out in the open and never are attempts made to dig one out. It is against the law to alter or destroy habitat in pursuit of a reptile or amphibian. There are no signs left behind when a veteran snake enthusiast visits an area.
- Because of the possibility of injury to the animal, a snake is never forcefully pulled out from under a rock or other object.
- The tools of the experienced hunter are simply a snake hook and possibly tongs. Never are tools used that surround a snake such as a noose. (Note: Legal devices are listed in the regulations and a noose is not a legal device for capturing reptiles and amphibians in the Commonwealth.) The snake hook is a handling tool. It is never used in a rake type fashion to capture a snake. Tongs, on the other hand, are not a handling tool but rather a device that is used to move or lift a snake quickly to a location where it can be worked with a handling tool. When using tongs, a snake is only picked up in its mid section, with minimal pressure, and never picked up by the head, neck, or tail.
- Snakes are never pinned behind the head because of the possibility of injury to the fragile bones of the snake's jaw and head. Furthermore, this is a dangerous and unnecessary practice. Compared to other species of rattlesnakes, the timber rattlesnake has a tendency to thrash when pinned behind the head. Most bites occur because an individual is attempting to pick up a snake. When a snake must be handled, for one reason or another, most experienced handlers use a clear plastic tube.
- An experienced hunter never harasses, captures, or intentionally disturbs gravid female snakes.
- Experienced hunters visually identify male snakes by their build and size thereby greatly limiting the number of female snakes captured.
- When in doubt...do not touch.

- Snakes are never measured in areas of open intense sun. The snake will become overheated and stressed, particularly while in a tube. Once a snake is in possession, it is recommended that it be kept in a breathable “cloth” bag or other “breathable” container out of the direct sun. Never should a non-porous container such as a plastic livestock feed bag be used. Remember, you now must help control the temperature of the snake, so keep its container in the shade at all times.
- If at all possible, avoid capturing a snake when its eyes appear milky in color. This milky appearance is a sign that oils are present under the surface layer of skin in preparation for shedding. If the snake is captured, the outer layer of skin will likely be torn resulting in injury to the underlying new layer of skin.
- As required by the law concerning provisional timber rattlesnake permits, always return the snake to its exact point of capture. Research has shown that the survival rate is not good for snakes relocated even a few hundred yards from their capture site. As mentioned earlier, remember that this specimen may be 20 to 25 years in age. To an experienced snake enthusiast, it is an ethical obligation to return the snake to the exact location where it was captured.
- An experienced hunter only captures the snake they intend to keep and does their best not to disturb or harass other snakes.
- The experienced snake enthusiast knows the laws and regulations. Please view the regulations that accompanied your venomous snake permit or visit the PA Fish and Boat Commission website at www.fishandboat.com where a summary of the regulations can be found.
- Most importantly – ask questions. There are many avenues to information. Experienced snake enthusiasts will be more than willing to answer your questions concerning the do’s and don’ts of snake hunting and handling. Your local Waterways Conservation Officer or the biologists of the PA Fish and Boat Commission’s Natural Diversity Section (814-359-5237) will be able to provide helpful information. Again, please remember we are all stewards of our wild lands and forests and need to do our very best to ensure that the timber rattlesnake can be observed in the wild by generations to come.