

Upland Snake Species Profile:

Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake

Crotalus adamanteus

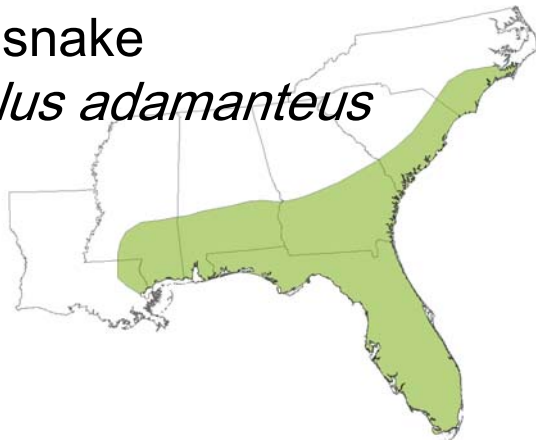


Photo: J. Flynn

Range: The primary range of the eastern diamondback rattlesnake is within the Atlantic coastal plain, from southeastern North Carolina south to the Florida Keys and west to southeastern Mississippi and eastern Louisiana.

Identification: The eastern diamondback rattlesnake is the longest and heaviest venomous snake in North America. The largest individuals can reach lengths up to 251 cm (8 feet) and weigh over 7 kg (15 lbs). The body is typically brown with dark dorsal blotches with yellow borders. A pair of yellow bordered stripes extend downward across the face.

Natural History: Diamondback rattlesnakes can be found in wiregrass flatwoods, oak woodlands and lowland palmetto, although they may be found in other areas. Burrows and other underground refugia are essential for these snakes to find shelter during fires or in temperature extremes.

Once a home range is established, individual snakes will stay in the same area for years, rarely moving significant distances and may return frequently to favored hiding spots. Typically found on the ground, diamondbacks may climb short distances into trees and are excellent swimmers.

Eastern diamondback rattlesnakes specialize in mammalian prey, such as rabbits, squirrels and cotton rats, but may take birds as well. Prey animals are usually taken by ambush, although snakes can follow scent trails to find their next meal. Rattlesnakes, as pit vipers, also can detect infrared heat waves that can help them locate prey.

Diamondback rattlesnakes are highly venomous and are potentially dangerous to humans if care is not taken. Venom is hemolytic and most bites require immediate treatment. These snakes should not be disturbed. Rattlesnakes play a key role in the ecology of the systems in which they inhabit, controlling rodent populations while juveniles serve as prey for a host of mammals and birds.

Conservation: Eastern diamondback rattlesnakes are locally abundant in some areas, but are likely declining over much of its range and they are listed as endangered in North Carolina. Habitat degradation and road mortality likely play large roles in its imperilment, as does over-collection for meat and leather and wanton killing, including rattlesnake roundups

Useful References:

Conant, R. and J.T. Collins. 1998. A Field Guide to the Reptiles and Amphibians of Eastern and Central North America. Houghton Mifflin Company. New York.

Ernst, C.H. and E.M. Ernst. 2003. Snakes of the United States and Canada. Smithsonian Institution. Washington.

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