

CROTALUS ATROX (BAIRD & GIRARD, 1853) IN THE
TERRARIUM.

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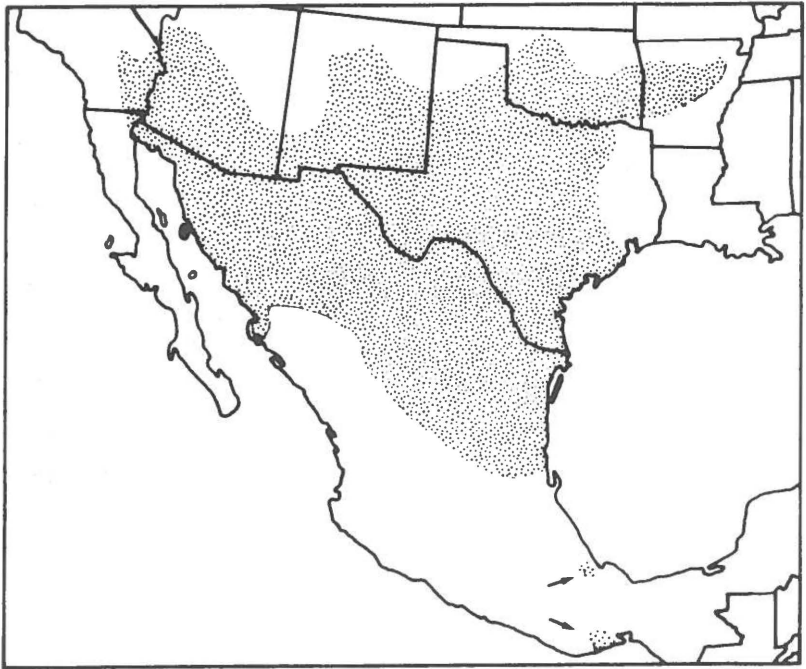
DESCRIPTION

Crotalus atrox is the largest rattlesnake of western America: measuring 180-200 cm long, it has a rather stout body and a broad heart-shaped head clearly distinct from the neck. The marks on the back form a series of hexagonal patterns surrounded by a white line. There are also two white lines clearly visible along the sides of the head. One of these lines runs from the eye to the upperlip which it reaches before the corner of the mouth. The tail is black and white banded. The scales are keeled. The female is always smaller than the male and never grows larger than 140 cm. This rattlesnake has a powerful haemotoxic poison. The poison fangs are about 2.5 cm long.

DISTRIBUTION

Crotalus atrox occurs from the south of central Mexico northwards to the states Arkansas, Oklahoma and Texas.

It lives in the dry or semi-arid zones from sea-level up to 2100 m in the U.S.A. and up to 2800 m in Mexico.



Map 1. Distribution area of *Crotalus atrox*.
Following Conant, 1975 and Klauber, 1972.

CROTALUS ATROX IN THE TERRARIUM

This species is, because of its character, not suited for unexperienced snake-keepers. Just like *Crotalus viridis* and *Crotalus adamanteus*, *Crotalus atrox* is a very short-tempered snake. It is almost impossible to see these snakes in a rest-position. However, they "learn" easily, so that they become calmer after a number of years, although this is not valid for all specimens. Some snakes will accept a dead prey that is given to them with a pair of forceps, after they have lived in the terrarium for about two years. There are other specimens that start rattling even after ten years in the terrarium. Typical is the attack- and defend posture of these snakes (photo 2). From



Foto 1. *Crotalus atrox*. Foto: V. Pezzano.

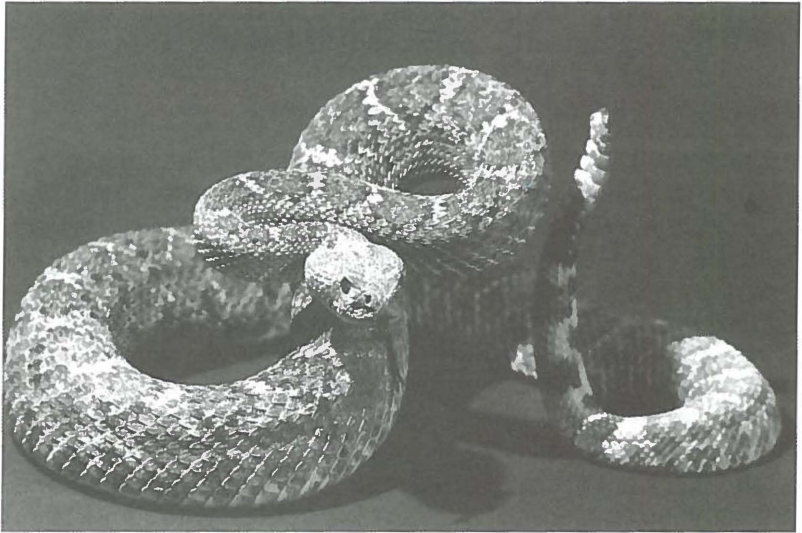


Foto 2. *Crotalus atrox*. Foto: V. Pezzano.

this position the snake can cover a wide area. In America there are many people bitten by rattlesnakes every year and it is suspected that the species most often responsible is *Crotalus atrox*. This species accepts food in the terrarium without problems, like rabbits, rats, mice and chicks. If we are dealing with an adult, recently imported specimen, it is recommended to feed it with dead prey, because every movement in the terrarium will make the snake nervous. Young specimens or snakes that are born in the terrarium will never present problems in feeding.

The terrarium has to be adapted to the size of the snake and can be made more beautiful with a few rocks and on the bottom a layer of gravel as used in an aquarium.

A small bowl of water is always necessary, even if the snakes come from a very dry climate. I have often seen my snakes drink. During the summer the day temperature in the coldest place in the terrarium has to be higher than 27°C, and during the night 20°C.

Hibernation is possible for these snakes, but not strictly necessary. During the winter period the temperature may be allowed to drop to 24°C during the day and 15°C during the night. These differences in temperature, but also the length of the day light are a stimulant for mating behaviour.

THE COUPLE IN THE TERRARIUM

A male of 140 cm and a female of 100 cm were placed together in one terrarium in April. The measurements of the terrarium were 140x80x80 cm (lxwxh). The male was clearly willing to copulate. He was very active during the day and had not eaten for eight weeks. The female showed no interest in the advances of her partner and withdrew into her hiding-place. Nonetheless there was a copula-

tion observed at the end of April. A fortnight after the copulation the male was placed back in his own terrarium where he fasted for another three weeks. The female kept eating until 135 days after the copulation. By this time she had become visibly distended in the neighbourhood of the tail. After 168 days she gave birth to five young (three males and two females). She also pushed down two unfertilized eggs. She accepted two rats on the same day of the birth.

The young were placed in a separate terrarium with a temperature of 25⁰C. They sloughed for the first time after eight days. At that time it was possible to hear the high humming-sound of their first rattles. Two weeks after birth they ate just-hairy mice. After five months they were 40 cm long and had two rattles.

In subsequent years several other births took place with 10-12 young per birth. In literature a maximum of twenty-five young is mentioned.

Crotalus atrox is, when it is born in captivity, an easy to keep and long living snake species. They can live for more than twenty years in captivity.

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