From Rattlesnakes

By Russell Freedman

In rattlesnake country a dark cave in the side of a cliff might be a rattlesnake den. Rattlesnakes come to the cave when summer ends. On warm days they stretch out on the rocks and soak up the autumn sun.

As the days get colder, the snakes crawl deep inside the cave, where the frost can't reach them.

They coil their bodies together into a great ball of snakes. Then they fall asleep, or hibernate, all winter long.

Rattlers often share their dens with copperheads, milk snakes, garter snakes, and other kinds of snakes. Hundreds of snakes may spend the winter sleeping together in the same cave.

When spring comes, they wake up, and as the warm weather sets in, they leave their winter den for good. They crawl off in all directions, ready to prowl for food and mates.

Rattlesnakes are found only in the Americas, especially in the United States and Mexico. They live in all sorts of wild country — in forests, prairies, and deserts; in thick underbrush and on rocky mountain slopes.

There are fifteen kinds of rattlesnakes on the United States mainland. The biggest is the eastern diamondback. It can be up to eight feet long! The smallest is the scrappy little pigmy rattlesnake, which is less than two feet long.

Rattlers are pit vipers, a family of poisonous snakes that have thick bodies, narrow necks, and big, wedge-shaped heads. Pit vipers get their name from the pits in their cheeks, which they use to hunt warm-blooded animals like birds and mice. The pits «ense heat. They tell the snake if an animal is nearby or

how far away it is. Guided by its pits, a rattlesnake can strike at warm-blooded prey in total darkness. And it will hit its target every time.

One thing sets a rattlesnake apart from all other snakes — its rattle. When a rattler is born, it has no rattle. Instead, it has a small, hard button at the tip of its tail. The first time the young rattlesnake sheds its skin, it loses its baby-button and gains its first real rattle. From then on, a new rattle appears every time the snake sheds its skin. Each rattle is a dry, hollow scale connected loosely to the rattles on either side.

Hearing a snake rattle in the wilderness can be very fright­ening. At first it sounds as if dried bones are being clicked together very rapidly. Then, as the rattler shakes its tail faster, it sounds more like the angry buzz of an insect or the hiss of escap­ing steam.

This sound is a warning. A rattlesnake shakes its tail to scare off enemies and give itself time to

escape. Its rattle can save the snake from being stepped on by a horse or attacked by a dog.

A rattlesnake's fangs are as sharp as a doctor's needle. When the fangs aren't being used, they fold back against the roof of the mouth. As the rattler opens its mouth to strike, the fangs spring forward and snap into place. A hollow tube carries poison from a gland in the rattler's cheek to a small hole at the tip of each fang.

When a rattler bites a victim; muscles in its cheeks squeeze against the poison glands. The poison squirts through the snake's fangs and into the victim's wound.

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Snake poison is actually a special kind of saliva. A rattlesnake's poison is strong enough to kill a small animal in a few minutes. Dried rattlesnake poison keeps its deadly strength for at least fifty years.

Read the questions, and write your answers on the lines. You may look back at the selection to help with your answers.

1. To what part of the world should a scientist go to study rattlesnakes in the wild?
2. How is a rattlesnake different from all other snakes?
3. Why are its rattles important to a rattlesnake?
4. How does poison get from the rattlesnake into the victim’s body?
5. How strong is rattlesnake poison?

Read the questions, and make a mark next to your answer. One, two, or three answers could be correct. You may look back at the selection to help you with your answers.

1. What do snakes do when spring comes?
2. they hunt for food
3. they move to caves
4. they look for mates
5. they wake up
6. How big are the biggest rattlesnakes?
7. longer than a person lying down
8. about as heavy as an elephant
9. almost two feet long
10. over fifteen feet long
11. How do pit vipers look?
12. they have thick bodies
13. they have wedge-shaped heads
14. they have wide necks
15. they are much shorter than rattlesnakes
16. How do the pits in the cheeks of a rattlesnake help it catch food?
17. The pits help the snakes smell the animals
18. They sense heat
19. They tell the snake how far away the animal is.
20. They scare enemies and give the snake time to escape.
21. What can a rattlesnake sound like?
22. dried bones being clicked together
23. the buzz of an insect
24. the step of a horse
25. the hiss of escaping steam