

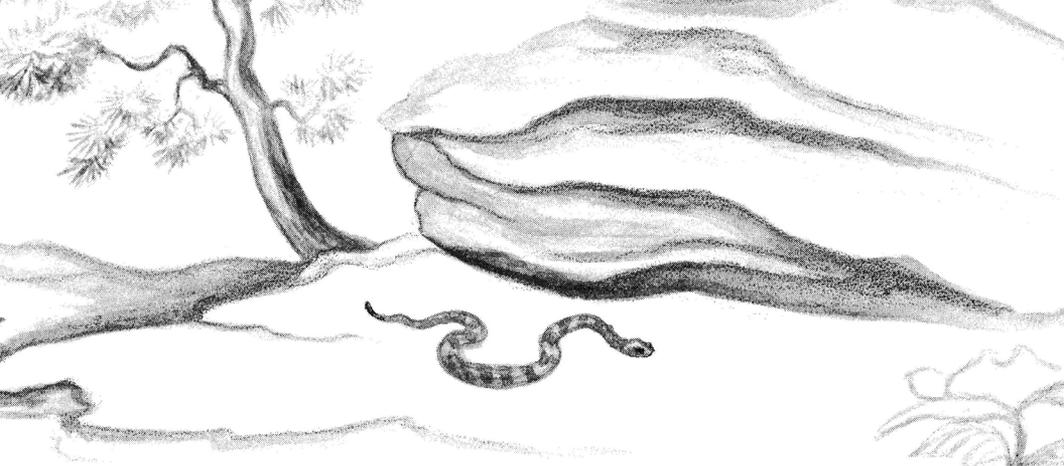
BUZZTAIL

THE STORY OF A RATTLESNAKE

Robert McClung

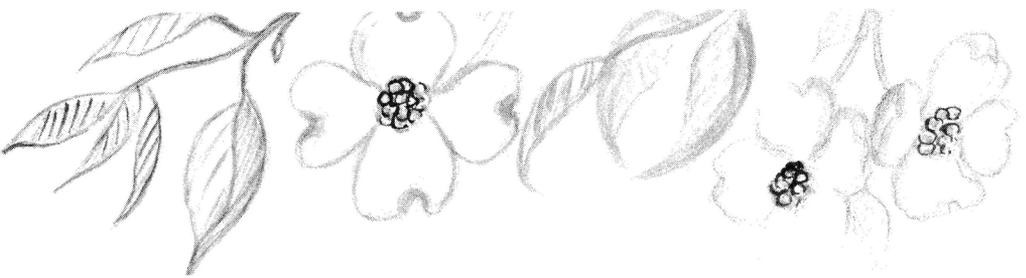


THE GOOD AND THE BEAUTIFUL LIBRARY



The rattlesnake had crawled out of his den at noon and was basking in the bright sunshine. The ground beneath him felt warm, for the rocky ridge got the full benefit of the afternoon sun. It was late May.

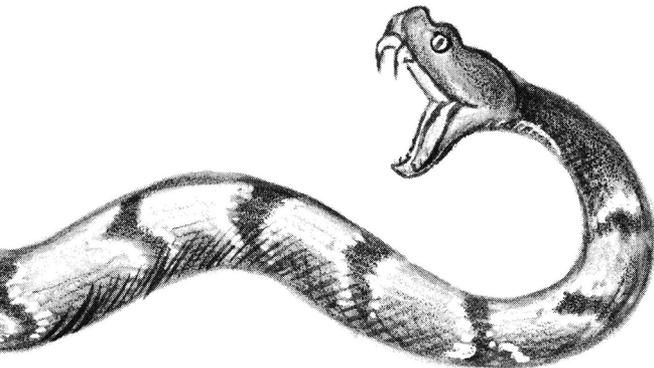
A dogwood tree was in bloom beside the trail, and a big green-clouded swallowtail was fluttering around a sassafras tree, laying her eggs on the newly opened leaves. The big snake shifted his coils. High over the ridge an eagle, soaring on motionless wings, saw him. Downward the great bird of prey plummeted.

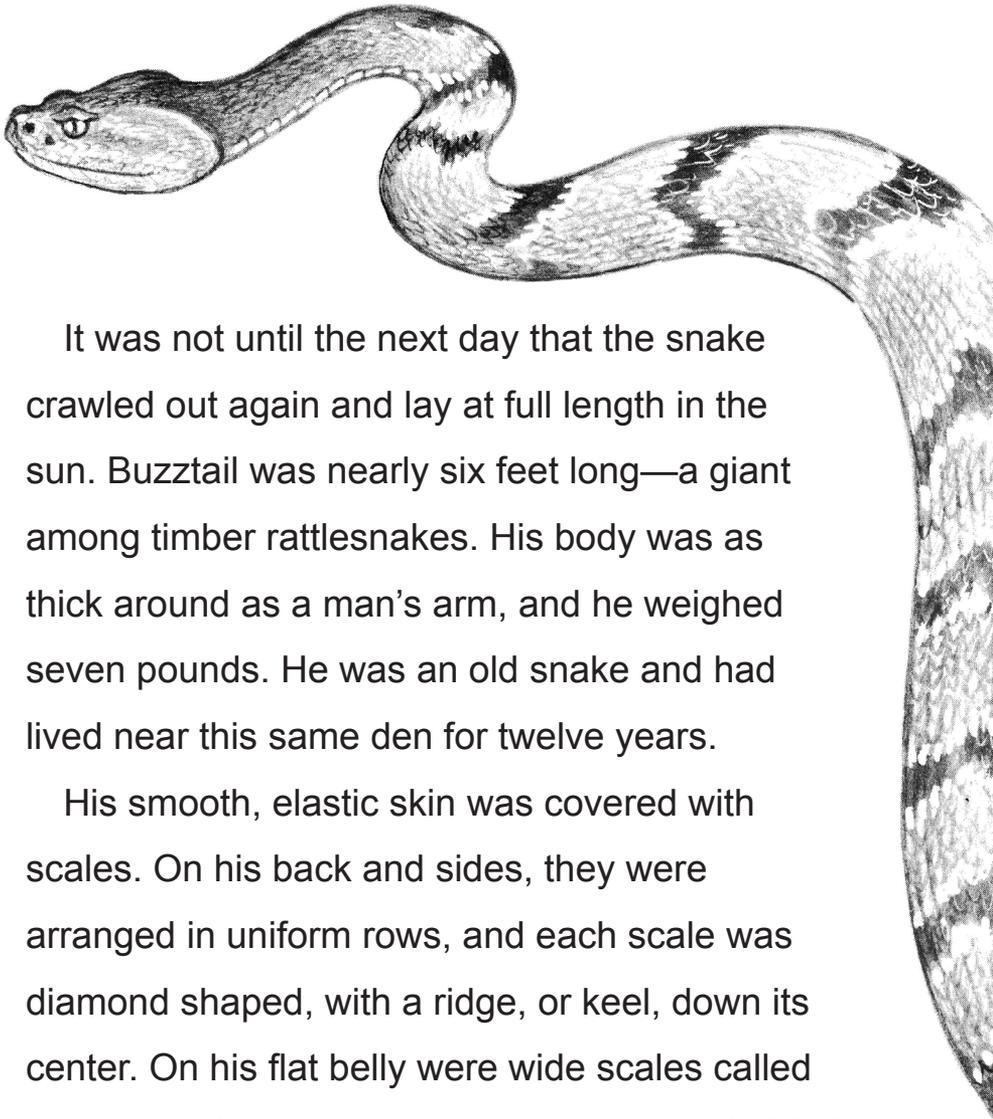




The eagle attacked quickly, its sharp talons grasping the snake's middle. Surprised, the snake struck back, and his fangs just grazed the tip of one of the eagle's rapidly beating wings.

For a split second, the eagle relaxed its grip. Before it could seize the snake again, he had glided under a big overhanging rock. Bobbing its head, the eagle peered under the rock for a moment. Then it flapped heavily away.

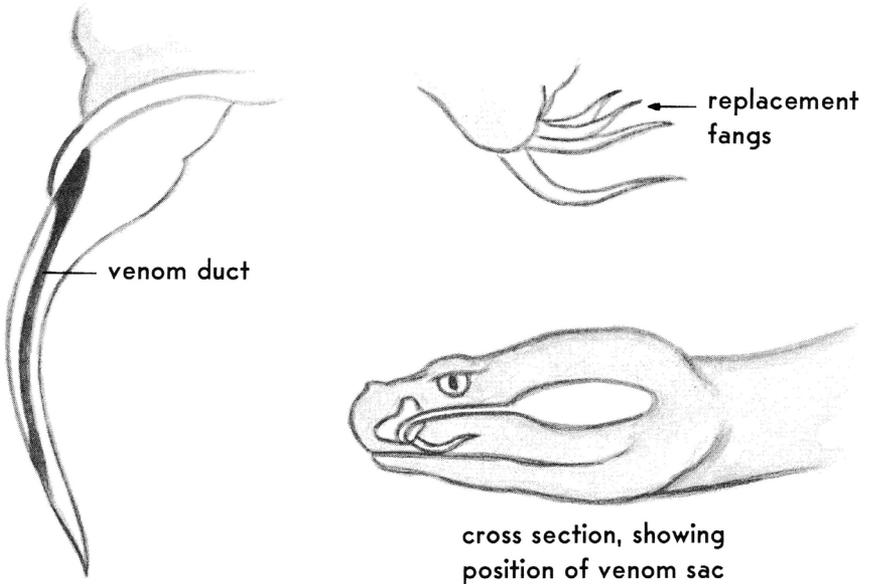


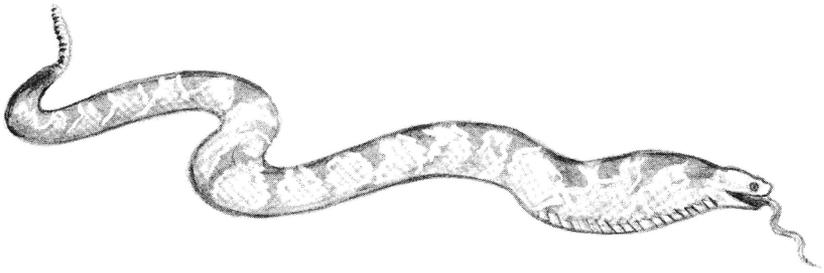


It was not until the next day that the snake crawled out again and lay at full length in the sun. Buzztail was nearly six feet long—a giant among timber rattlesnakes. His body was as thick around as a man's arm, and he weighed seven pounds. He was an old snake and had lived near this same den for twelve years.

His smooth, elastic skin was covered with scales. On his back and sides, they were arranged in uniform rows, and each scale was diamond shaped, with a ridge, or keel, down its center. On his flat belly were wide scales called scutes, each of which overlapped the one behind it. Buzztail's scales formed definite patterns of different colors. His background color was a dull yellowish-brown, with many dark, sooty crossbands.

The fangs were anchored in hinged bones which could rotate backward and forward. When Buzztail's mouth was closed, the fangs folded back against the roof of his mouth. But when he opened his jaws, the fangs sprung into an upright position, ready for biting. Behind each of the fangs in use were several partly developed ones, ready to take the place of either regular fang if it was broken off or pulled out.

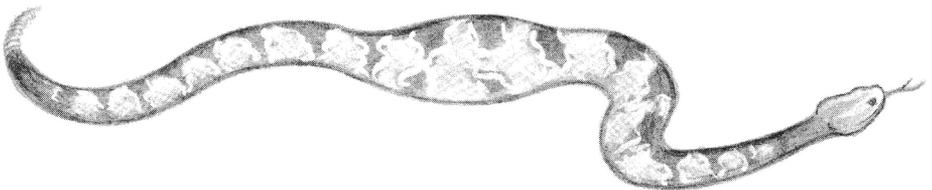




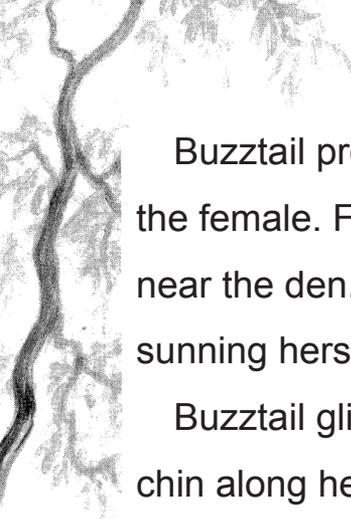
section to stretch apart and work separately. This arrangement, plus his elastic skin, made it possible for him to swallow animals whose bodies were bigger around than his.

Little by little the wood rat disappeared. Its body became coated with saliva as it went down, making it easier for Buzztail to swallow. Finally only its tail could be seen. That soon disappeared too.

Buzztail crawled back under the rock and lay at full length. There was a big bulge in his middle where the wood rat was, and he was very lethargic. For three days he lay there, digesting his meal.

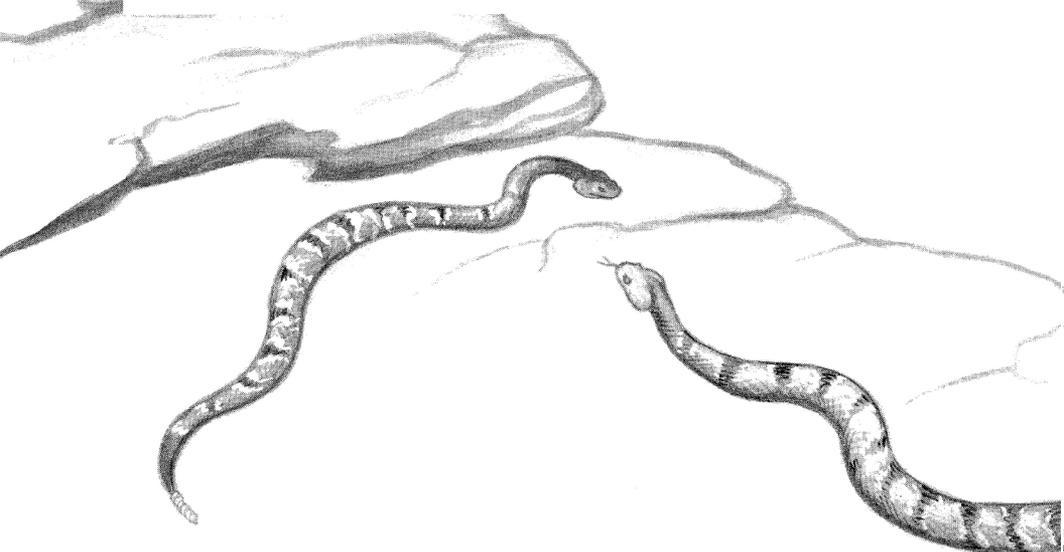






Buzztail promptly turned back to the trail of the female. Following it, he came to a big rock near the den. There was a female rattlesnake, sunning herself.

Buzztail glided up beside her and rubbed his chin along her back. They flicked their tongues over each other, getting acquainted. The female was about four feet long and much lighter and brighter than Buzztail. She was a sulfur-yellow color, with pale tan crossbands.

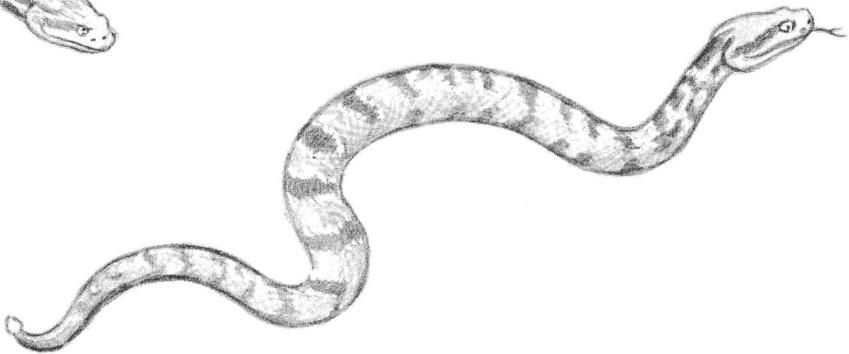






world it had just entered. Then it crawled over to a sunny spot near Buzztail and lay still.

During the next several hours, sixteen other little rattlesnakes were born. All of them came into the world fully equipped to take care of themselves. They were able to crawl about, catch prey, and inflict venomous bites, just as Buzztail could. It was a good thing that they were able to take care of themselves, for their parents paid no attention to them at all.





prebutton



button



button and first segment

At birth, each rattlesnake has a tiny node, called a prebutton, at the end of its tail. When it is a few days old, the baby rattler sheds its skin and

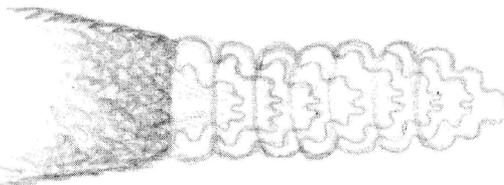
gets a button—the first segment of its rattle. From then on it gains a segment every time it sheds. Each new rattle grows inside the previous one and is loosely interlocked with it.



During their first year, timber rattlers shed their skin four or five times and

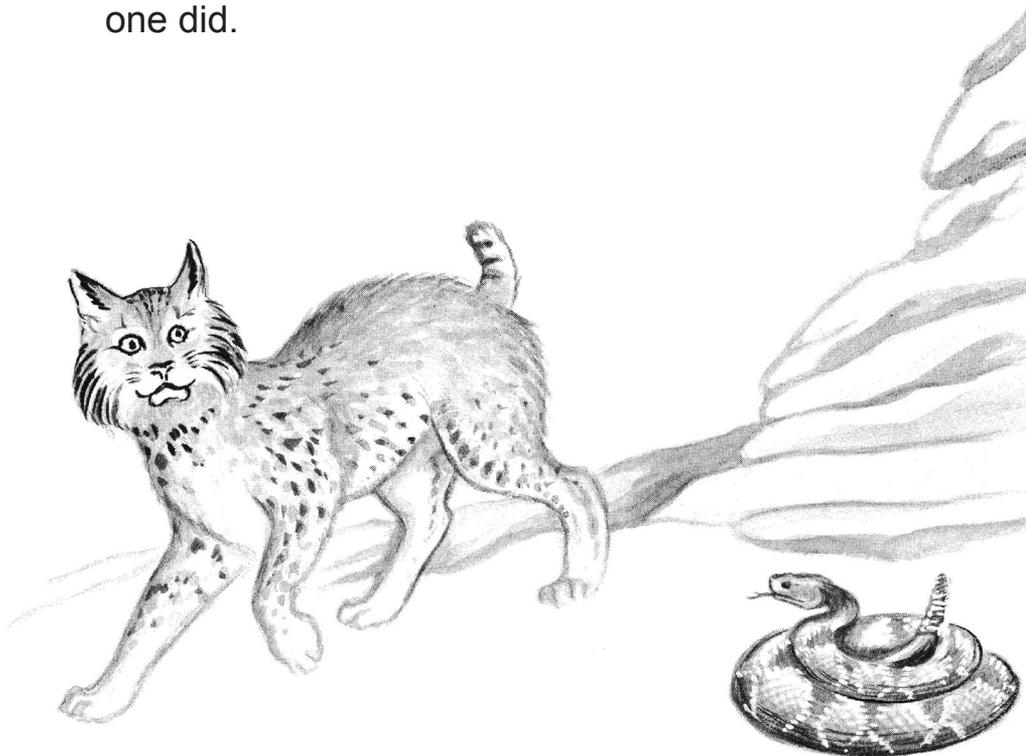
grow to be eighteen or twenty inches long. At two years, they measure twenty-four inches or more, and when they are three, over thirty inches. By this time they have as many as ten or eleven

cross section of
rattle, showing how
segments are joined



When spring came, with its warm rains and rising temperatures, the snakes began to stir. One warm, sunny day in early May, Buzztail crawled sluggishly to the den entrance and lay for a few moments in the sunshine. As the days became warmer, he and the other snakes spent more time outside.

One afternoon a big bobcat found Buzztail. Bobcats do not often attack rattlesnakes, but this one did.





He sprang at Buzztail and then jumped back, playing with him as a house cat plays with a mouse. Buzztail struck back, and his fangs brushed against the other animal's fur.

The big cat circled then dashed in to attack once more. He lashed out with his paw, and his sharp talons ripped bloody furrows in Buzztail's back. Buzztail struck back a second time, but the bobcat leaped out of reach as before.

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Something else moved in front of him. It was a big male rattler. Buzztail reared his head at this new threat, hissing loudly. The rival, almost as big as Buzztail, was a dull black color all over, with bands of an even deeper black showing faintly.

As the “biggest rattler on the mountainside,” Buzztail has seen it all. As you follow along with his adventures and challenges, you will learn about the life cycle of a rattlesnake. You will also meet many other animals and plants that share his ecosystem. This entertaining, yet informative, story will leave you with a deeper knowledge and appreciation of these scaly, slithering creatures.

