

## The Rattlesnake and the Hibernaculum: Animals, Ignorance, and Extinction in the Early American Underworld

*By Whitney Barlow Robles*

Though rattlesnakes have been enduring objects of fascination for scholars of early America, almost all existing studies approach them as revolutionary icons, representations, or mere occasions to explore human politics. This article uses a long-forgotten specimen to uncover the lost history of timber rattlesnakes as material beings that shaped everyday life and colonial science in the long eighteenth century. As animals with subterranean social networks hidden from view, a cryptic sensorium, semiotic rattles, and fear-inducing lethality, rattlesnakes brewed a perfect storm of ignorance for colonial science and expansion. Many Euro-American naturalists preferred to avoid studying them. European settlers attempted to wipe rattlesnakes from existence by preying on their unique kinship structures and reproductive ecology, setting practices and attitudes in motion that have led to the local extirpation or endangerment of timber rattlesnakes throughout much of their historical range. Meanwhile, various Native Americans shielded the snakes from settler violence through calculated obfuscation of their whereabouts. Today's conservationists continue an unacknowledged legacy of eighteenth-century Native peoples by hiding the locations of rattlesnake dens, called hibernacula. By employing a species-specific approach and interdisciplinary methods, this article considers the intractability of animal histories writ large.