Carboniferous Fact File

Snake
How the snakes evolved, or what they evolved from, is a topic of fierce debate amongst palaeontologists. The most common theory is that they used to be lizards that took to burrowing underground and so lost their legs over time in order to move more easily through sand and soil. Another theory is that they are related to the giant sea predators *Mosasaur*s that also seemed to have flexible hinges in their jaws to allow them to swallow large prey. Some scientists even think that snakes evolved many times in the past and are not related to each other at all!

Specialised body plan
However they developed, by the Carboniferous there were forms around that we would recognise with no difficulties at all. Like modern snakes, they have long thin muscular bodies with many ribs running down their length. Their jaws did not have the specialised hinges that modern snakes have, but did appear to be flexible enough to let them swallow large animals. Their jaws were lined with many needle-sharp teeth to catch their prey, and their skulls indicate that they already had a good sense of smell and vision.

Hunting
Modern snakes catch and kill their prey with a variety of methods; constrictors suffocate their victims by wrapping their muscular bodies around them, while venomous snakes inject toxins into their prey and wait for them to die. We may never know how the first snakes hunted, but they certainly made the forests of the Carboniferous a dangerous place for small animals.