

GARTER SNAKES



DESCRIPTION

The common garter snake is indigenous to North America. Most garter snakes have a pattern of yellow stripes on a brown background and their average length is about 1 metre (3.3 ft) to 1.5 metres (4.9 ft).

BIOLOGY

In the early part of spring, usually March or April, when snakes are coming out of hibernation the males generally emerge first to be ready when the females wake up. Some males will assume the role of a female and lead other males away from the burrow, luring them with a fake female pheromone. After such a male has led rivals away, he "turns" back into a male

and races back to the den, just as the females emerge. He is then the first to mate with all the females he can. There are generally far more males than females and that is why, during mating season, they form "mating balls", where one or two females will be completely swarmed by ten or more males. Sometimes, a male snake will mate with a female before hibernation and the female will store the sperm internally until spring, when she will allow her eggs to be fertilized. If she mates again in the spring, the fall sperm will degenerate, and the spring sperm will fertilize her eggs. Females give birth to 12-15 snakelets any time from February through December.

The saliva of a garter snake may be toxic to amphibians and other small animals. For humans, a bite is not dangerous, though it may cause slight itching, burning, and/or swelling. Most garter snakes also secrete a foul-smelling fluid from postanal glands when handled or harmed.

HABITS

The habitat of the garter snake ranges from forests, fields, prairies, streams, wetlands, meadows, marshes and ponds, and it is often found near water. It is a semi-aquatic animal like most snakes. It is found at altitudes from sea level to mountain locations. Their diet consists mainly of amphibians and earthworms, but also fish, small birds, toads and rodents are eaten. Garter snakes are effective at catching fish and small to medium tadpoles. Animals that eat the common garter snake include large fish (such as bass and catfish), bullfrogs, snapping turtles, milk snakes, hawks, raccoons, foxes and domestic cats.

In summer, the garter snake is most active in the morning and late afternoon; in cooler seasons or climates, it restricts its activity to the warm afternoons.



In warmer southern areas, the snake is active year-round. Otherwise, it sleeps in common dens, sometimes in great numbers. On warm winter afternoons, some snakes have been observed emerging from hibernation to bask in the sun.

CONTROL

Removal of snakes begins with regular yard work. Plant bushes and shrubs away from the home and trim them back often to prevent intrusions. Frequently mow the lawn to keep grass levels low. Garter snakes find refuge from predators as well as hunt for their next meal in high grasses.

Remove the snake's food. Homeowners with mouse or insect problems may discover garter snakes as well. Have the home inspected for rodents.

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