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Common Garter Snake

Thamnophis sirtalis

by B. Donovan and N. Allen



Of all the snakes in North America, humans probably encounter common garter snakes most often. There are four types of garter snakes in Oregon: the common garter snake, western aquatic garter snake, western terrestrial garter snake, and northwestern garter snake. The common garter snake is one of the most abundant snakes found

in Oregon and is the most widely distributed snake in North America.

Snakes are diurnal, which means they are active during the day. Many live in residential areas. In fact, humans create structures that benefit snakes. Common garters often are seen in gardens or basking in the sun around swimming pools.

Common garters play an important role in the food chain. They are both predators (they eat other animals) and prey (they are eaten by other animals). Birds, skunks, raccoons, and opossums eat garter snakes.

Roads are particularly dangerous for snakes. Snakes often get run over by cars when crossing or when sunning themselves on the warm pavement.

Photo: A. Zerrenner, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



Photo: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



The common garter snake is one of the most abundant snakes found in Oregon.

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Species description

All four species of garter snakes found in Oregon look very much alike. They often live together in the same area.

The common garter is the largest of the four garter snakes in Oregon. It can grow to about 52 inches long from head to tail. The common garter snake's scales come in a wide range of colors and patterns, but there usually is a yellowish or yellow-green stripe running down the backbone. Another yellowish stripe usually runs down each side, and most common garters have red spots on their sides.

The variation in colors and patterns depends on where the snake lives. Common garters have evolved to blend in with their environment, leading to different colors and patterns on their scales.

All snakes locate prey by smell and sight. Snakes have an extraordinary sense of smell. When they stick out their forked tongue, they are "sniffing" for prey and predators. Contrary to popular belief, snakes also have good short-range vision, which helps them locate and strike prey.

Snakes swallow their prey whole. They detach their jaw, which lets them open it twice as far as normal,

and their backward-facing teeth help push the food down their throat.



Snakes are ectotherms; their body temperature is regulated by outside conditions. Common garters can tolerate a wider range in temperatures than most snakes. Their preferred body temperature is around 86°F (30°C). Snakes spend a lot of time basking in the sun to warm their bodies.

During the summer, when it is hot, garters are more active during mornings and evenings, and they seek cover during the day to avoid getting too hot. Common garters are inactive in the winter and hibernate in cold climates. Snakes may emerge on warm days during the winter.

Courtship (attracting a mate) and mating occur in spring. Common garters do not lay eggs, but give birth to live young from July through September. They have 3 to 80 young per litter. Larger females give birth to more young.

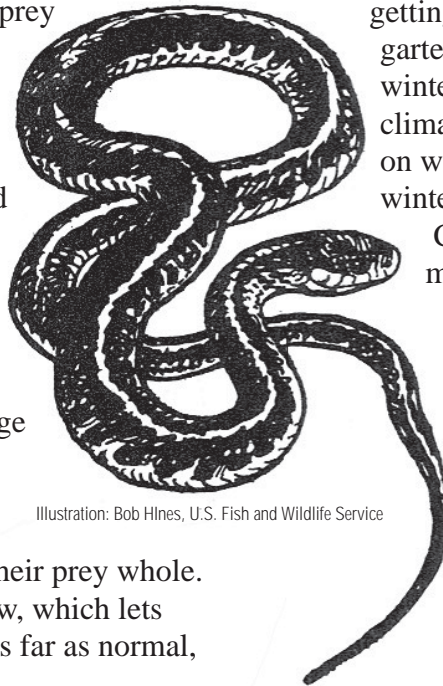


Illustration: Bob Hines, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

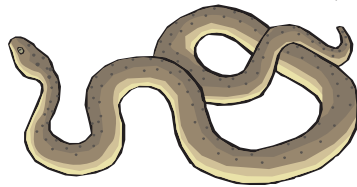


Where they live and why

Common garters live in many habitat types in Oregon. These habitats include grasslands, shrublands, forests, pond and stream edges, rocky hillsides, and residential areas. The common garter lives from sea level to 6,000 feet on Mt. Hood.

Common garters need food, water, cover, and places to bask in the sun.

Common garters eat a variety of foods. Some of their favorite foods are frogs, toads, salamanders, fish, slugs, earthworms, leeches, and bird eggs. They hunt on land, in ponds, and in slow-moving creeks and rivers.



Common garters normally are found in or near water. Many of their favorite foods are found near water.

Cover is used by garter snakes to avoid predators, to avoid harsh weather conditions, for giving birth, and for sleeping and hibernating. Cover for common garters can consist of small animal holes or burrows, brush piles, rock piles, crevices, logs, and even deep crevices in tree bark.

Basking usually occurs close to cover on rocks, hard soil, and dark surfaces. Hibernation occurs in rocky areas and places that don't freeze, such as underground.

Creating habitat



Creating a pond or using one that already exists is the best way to create habitat for common garters. Any size pond will work as long as it receives both sun and shade. The pond should have lots of plants growing in and around it. See *Create a Garden Pond for Wildlife*, listed under "Learn more!" A creek is another good source of water as long as it has these elements.

To create cover, make rock piles and brush piles, leave tall grasses, or plant shrubbery. A rock wall also provides adequate cover. Place some cover close to the water source and some farther away.

Garters need both sunny and cool areas. You can create warm basking sites in sunny locations with large, flat rocks or

small clearings of open ground. Choose several areas that have lots of sun either in the morning or in the afternoon. You can create cooler areas by planting trees and shrubs to provide shade and by creating wet areas such as ponds.

When creating habitat, remember that garters must have a way to get to your site. They need a travel corridor to a site where they live naturally. A travel corridor is a pathway that allows wildlife to travel between patches of suitable habitat. Leave patches of tall grass around waterways and between areas of suitable habitat, create brush piles, plant shrubs, and minimize open areas of short grass.

The presence of pesticides, lawnmowers, and pets will reduce the likelihood of garter snakes using your habitat.






It probably will take time for garters to move into your habitat, so be patient.

Photo: Gary Stolz, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



Garter snakes "sniff" for prey with their long forked tongue.

Fun facts

-  When captured, common garters often release a repulsive odor, much like a skunk.
-  Birds are the most common predators of snakes. Robins sometimes eat garter snakes.
-  Garters' saliva seems to be toxic to amphibians and other small animals and can produce swelling in some people.
-  Common garters live up to 10 years in captivity.
-  Common garters can eat newts that are toxic to other animals.

Learn more!

Attract Reptiles and Amphibians to Your Yard. D. Cates, J. Olson, and N. Allen. 2002. EC 1542. Oregon State University.

Create a Garden Pond for Wildlife. S. Lamb and N. Allen. 2002. EC 1548. Oregon State University.

The Garter Snakes. D.A. Rossman, N.B. Ford, and R.A. Seigel. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, OK.

Reptiles of Washington and Oregon. Brown et al. 1995. Seattle Audubon Society, Seattle, WA.

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