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Hiss-tory of the Eastern Garter Snake

The eastern garter snake is the most widely distributed snake in North America. It typically measures between 45-66 cm / 18-26 in long, but can reach lengths up to 124 cm / 49 in. Usually a dark green to black colour with three longitudinal yellow stripes (one down the back and one on each side of the body) and a pale yellow chin and belly, it is, nevertheless, highly variable in appearance. Some individuals are melanistic; that is, they have plain black backs and no stripes.

Others have whitish speckles or checkered markings; and then there are those bearing rusty-coloured patterns [photo]. Such varying characteristics make the identification of certain garter snakes tricky, as they can resemble northern water snakes, ribbon snakes or even young rat snakes. Although distinctly terrestrial, this species can climb and swim very well. A classic habitat generalist, the garter snake dwells in many different places, including forests, meadows, wetlands and rocky areas. It is often found near water. While it has also adapted to living in human-dominated environments, you have nothing to fear from this harmless snake. It is neither significantly venomous nor aggressive, and rarely causes nuisance situations. If provoked enough, a garter snake might coil and strike, but it much prefers to retreat or hide. It can release a foul-smelling discharge to discourage an attacker. Using its good short-range vision and excellent sense of smell, the garter snake hunts amphibians, earthworms, slugs, mice, small fish and aquatic invertebrates. It can detach its jaw, allowing the mouth to open twice as wide as normal, so prey can be swallowed whole. It uses its red, forked tongue to collect scents from the air which are passed along to a specialized nasal organ. This helps alert the snake to threats, mates and prey.

In cold climates, the garter snake spends the winter in a dormant state known as brumation. It shelters within burrows and stumps, under rock piles and inside the foundations of old buildings. Some dens are communal, with hundreds or even thousands of snakes huddling the winter away en masse. Now that spring is here, it is emerging from hibernation and looking to mate. Multiple snakes sometimes come together in mating frenzies near their hibernation sites. I witnessed this behaviour alongside a rocky area near my cottage a few years ago. The snakes were coiling and writhing around one another, sliding downhill in what looked like a pile of living rope. This is called a “mating ball.” The female can store sperm from a single mating to fertilize eggs for up to 5 years. Many people are surprised to learn that the female garter snake gives birth to live young, usually bearing 10-40 offspring around mid summer. Larger females bear larger litters. The baby snakes receive no maternal care and must fend for themselves. They will mature in 2-3 years. The garter snake may also mate in autumn, as many begin congregating at hibernation sites once again. This behaviour conserves energy and reduces risks, as it eliminates the need to travel in search of a mate.

The garter snake has many predators: herons, hawks, foxes, raccoons, weasels, and other snakes, to name just a handful. Yet, its deadliest threat is the automobile. Shockingly high numbers of garters are killed on Ontario roadways each year while basking on the warm pavement to help maintain their body temperature. Let's give the eastern garter snake a “brake” and be extra vigilant while driving between April and October.

Margie is a self-proclaimed nature nerd with a passion for all things finned, furred and feathered...even the creepy-crawly-scaly kinds. She's summered on Wolfe Lake since childhood and loves sharing what she learns about our wild things.