



Garter Snake

### **Taking a Closer Look at Garter Snake!**

**By Merrill Tawse**

This summer has left me somewhat encouraged. As a child I have many memories of looking down in mid-step and being somewhat startled by realizing that there was a snake below me. As the years have gone by, so have the snakes, it seems. In the past it was a fairly common to see a snake crossing the road, curled up by a stone in the garden or startling you as you walked in the woods. This is no longer true; their numbers have dramatically declined. However, this year I probably encountered more snakes than I have in the last ten years combined.

It has been great, not that I'm one who actively seeks them out (I'm more of a Salamander-Bat type of man), but I try and observe when I'm out there. The type I encountered the most was the Garter Snake. Most of these sightings were here at the Nature Center as well. This is not to say there is currently a population expansion with snakes but maybe more related to my being at the right place at the right time. Many of the animals I observed were ones that I found under sheets of metal in our open field. These metal sheets were placed there to attract snakes on sunny, cool mornings to warm up under as the sun hit them.

One day within 30 minutes I found seven snakes at three locations here. Why have the numbers of snakes been declining overall? In part it is due to the same factors as to why other animals are declining, chemicals in their environment (herbicides, pesticides, lawn care products, industrial pollutants, etc.) loss of habitat, reduction in prey populations and so on. Snakes have also suffered declines due to people going to great lengths to kill all those that they encounter. Snakes and people don't seem to mix.

Garter Snakes, **not Garden Snakes**, are the ones that people are most apt to encounter in our area. Garter Snakes include a number of species and subspecies and range from the Hudson Bay south through Florida and in parts from coast to coast. Colors and patterns vary a lot from type to type and individual to individual

However, as a group, they can quickly be identified by the lighter stripes running down the length of their body, one down the middle and two on the sides. The stripes, like those found on sock garters of the past, are how they got their common name.

We try to keep one on hand at all times. With a life span rarely over eight years we have gone through a several over the years. The two we currently have, we gathered this past summer. They are able to be handled but are still somewhat skittish so

if you are getting one out BE CAREFUL. Once they are in your hand they settle down pretty quickly. Newly caught snakes when held will frequently excrete a foul smelling substance from their cloaca. This behavior, referred as “musking”, is thought to make them distasteful to a predator. (Not having tried one I can only speculate!)

Garter Snakes can be found in a variety of habitats. From near water to wet meadows, ranging up to woodlands. They frequent gardens and edges of yards because of this. Many have fallen by the wayside from the blades of lawnmowers. Within their haunts they are “active predators”. They seek out and feed upon insects, worms, small frogs, salamanders, fish even an occasional small mouse. We feed ours earthworms and strips of raw fish. They don’t constrict their food the way our Black Rat Snake. Garter Snakes grab the food with their mouth and proceed to walk it in by alternating their jaws one side forward then the other. The snakes find their prey by “smelling” with their tongue. If you watch ours you will find it’s tongue to be red with black tips. When food is put in, the snake begins flicking its’ tongue in and out then moving towards the aromatic worm.

With snakes, like all reptiles, mating involves internal fertilization. In the case of most, the fertilized eggs are covered with a leathery eggshell and laid in the ground or under vegetative debris. However with some snakes, like the Garter Snake, the eggs remain in the female’s body and it gives birth to live young. This is not the same gestation as it is in mammals where a continual supply of food comes through the umbilical cord from the mother. Instead all the nutrients are provided with the ova in the beginning and the mother only serves as a mobile nest box. It would be possible then to remove the fertile egg and have it develop outside the mother if the moisture level was appropriate. The hatchling is about the thickness of a wet spaghetti noodle and 3 to 4 inches long.

One critical part of the Garter Snakes habitat is the wintering hibernacula. Garter Snakes come together in large numbers to spend the winter underground, whether an old groundhog hole or fissure in bedrock. As the snakes come and go this is the time that mating takes place. One female may be surrounded by a “mass” of males vying for her attention. Without these underground wintering sites the individuals cannot survive the harsh temperatures and the species is not able to proliferate. Around the “old homesteads” spots that met their requirements were easy to come by, but with our bent on neatness they can’t find these places around our homes anymore