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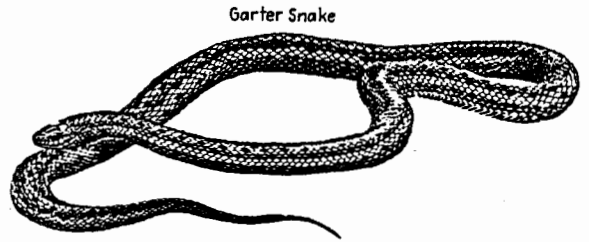
Natural History Notes

MIKE DOMBECK grew up in the Moose Lake area, attended Hayward Public Schools, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, University of Minnesota, and Iowa State University. He has a Ph. D. in Fisheries Biology. Mike has worked as an area fishing guide, taught Zoology at UW-Stevens Point, and is now a fisheries biologist with the USDA Forest Service, living in Park Falls, Wisconsin.

THE GARTER SNAKE



Ribbon Snake



Garter Snake

Probably the single most common snake in the United States is the common garter snake. It is the most widely distributed snake in North America and occurs farther north than any other. This non-poisonous, moderately-sized snake is one of twelve to fifteen species of garter snakes. It is also known as striped snake or garden snake. The garter snakes are closely related to the water snake and both will emit a foul smelling secretion from the anal gland when frightened.

The garter snake is a dark olive brown to black in color with three narrow yellow to reddish stripes along its back and sides. There is individual variation in color and pattern and a greater geographical variation. The stripes are usually well-defined but may be obscured by various colored blotches. The mature garter snake is generally two feet long, rarely attaining a length of four feet. The female is slightly longer and much thicker than the male.

This snake is found from Canada to Mexico, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific and from sea level to 8,000 feet. It is found throughout much of the United States except for the desert southwest where several other species of garter snakes are also found. The common garter snake can be found most often near some type of water, including wet meadows and woodlands, marshes and areas around irrigation ditches and storm sewers. This snake is diurnal, meaning it is active during the day and rests at night.

The common garter snake consumes a wider variety of food than any other North American snake. It feeds on earthworms, slugs and grasshoppers and other insects. Also, it eats various amphibians such as frogs and salamanders and small mammals, birds and fish. The garter snake swallows its catch whole.

This snake is the first to emerge from hibernation in the spring and the last to be seen in the autumn. The garter snake is relative cold tolerant and may be active the year round in the warmer parts of its range. In the north it hibernates in community dens.

The common garter snake is viviparous, meaning it bears live young; the eggs are retained and hatched within the snake's body. The common garter snake produces from 7 to 85 young, the average being around 20. They are usually born in late June to August and, farther north, as late as October. The young are on their own as soon as they are born. They mature in one year and breed the following spring. The common garter snake has lived to be more than ten years old in captivity, but likely doesn't live nearly as long in the wild. Like all animals, snakes have many enemies but the most detrimental is man. Human activities are responsible for the indiscriminate eradication of snakes. It is important to remember that these animals play an important role in the web of life.