

School-to-Nature



Adult Garter Snake



Baby Garter Snake

Garter Snake

The Garter Snake is the most widespread snake in North America; it is common in Wisconsin, and on all Conservancy lands. An adult Garter Snake may reach up to 4 feet long and can live 15 years. Like most snakes, the Garter Snake uses its sensitive forked tongue to “smell” its prey, and then bites and swallows it whole. It eats: frogs, toads, salamanders, earthworms, small fish, tadpoles, mice, bird eggs, slugs, crayfish, leeches and even other small snakes. In return, these snakes are the prey of hawks and other hunting birds, skunks, raccoons and minks.

After mating, a mother Garter Snake keeps the fertilized eggs in her body until they hatch, and she gives birth to 4-80 tiny full-formed baby snakes who are ready to be on their own, in August or September. In winter, Garter Snakes gather together in large groups to hibernate, sheltering in old animal dens or under logs.

Garter snakes are unlikely to bite a human, but it is possible, and a few species have a mild chemical in their saliva that can cause pain or swelling; but they are not considered poisonous. Many people handle Garter Snakes with safety as long as they are gentle. Garter Snakes are easily spooked if the handler is nervous, and can discharge a bad-smelling “musk” if they feel threatened.

Garter snakes got their name because they were thought to look like the ribbon-straps that men used in olden days to hold their stockings up to their knees. A photo of old-time stockings and garters is at the right.



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