



Common Garter Snake (*Thamnophis sirtalis* ssp.)

Tham-noe-fiss sirt-uh-liss and *sem-e-fas-she-ate-iss*



Harmless/Nonvenomous

Description: 16 to 30 inches. Common garter snakes are a small to medium sized, moderately built garter snake with a ground color ranging from black, grayish, brown, to olive with three longitudinal stripes ranging in color from yellowish to cream colored. Some specimens may have checkered patterning and/or reddish flecks between longitudinal stripes. The Chicago subspecies may often have dark vertical cross bars along the anterior third of the body. The belly or ventral surface is usually pale cream to yellowish with dark crescents along the ventral scale margins. The lateral stripes covers scale rows 2-3.

Scales: Keeled

Anal Plate: Undivided

Taxonomy and Classification:

Life: All living, physical, and animate entities

Domain: Eukaryota

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata/Vertebrata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Suborder: Serpentes

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Infraorder: Alethinophidia

Family: Colubridae

Subfamily: Natricinae

Genus: *Thamnophis*

Species: *Thamnophis sirtalis**

*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

Similar/Confusing Species: The Butler's Garter snake (*Thamnophis butleri*) has lateral stripes covering the upper parts of scale rows 2, 3, and part of 4, unmarked or lightly marked labial scales below the eye, and a relatively smaller, blunter head and indistinct neck. The plains garter snake (*Thamnophis radix*) has lateral stripes covering scale rows 3 and 4, and has dark barring/markings on the labial scales. Ribbon snakes (*Thamnophis proximus*) and (*Thamnophis sauritus*) are generally much more slender bodied than garter snakes, have longer tails at the ventral scale, lateral stripes on scale rows 3 and 4, and white, cream colored, to lighter labial and ventral scales. Lined snakes (*Tropidoclonion lineatum*) have a row of linear, dark pencil point markings on the ventral surface. Red bellied snakes (*Storeria occipitomaculata*) and DeKay's brown snakes (*Storeria dekayi*) have divided anal plates, and usually have 3 paler distinct longitudinal stripes, unlike garter snakes.

Etymology: Thamnophis- Thamnos (bush) ophio (snake). sirtalis-like a garter. semifasciatus-Semi (half); fasciatus (banded).

Subspecies: Eastern garter snake (*Thamnophis s. sirtalis*) and Chicago Garter snake (*Thamnophis s. semifasciatus*). Other subspecies potentially occurring in Wisconsin, such as the Red sided garter snake (*Thamnophis s. parietalis*) are still awaiting taxonomic revision and clarification.

Range & Habitat: Common to abundant statewide. Common garter snakes may be found in nearly any habitat in Wisconsin, but especially prefer grassy "edge" habitats such as forest edges, suburban areas, and margins of ponds, marshes, and other wetlands.

Habits & Natural History: Common garter snakes are abundant, and perhaps the most widespread snake species in Wisconsin. Two subspecies occur in Wisconsin; the Chicago subspecies is found in southeastern and south central regions, while the eastern ranges throughout the state. They are typically diurnal predators, overpowering their prey without constriction including small fish, frogs, worms, insects, and other invertebrates. As with many snakes, these snakes emit a noxious smelling musk, and may attempt to bite when captured or cornered. Common garter snakes are harmless to humans, however, and should not be persecuted. Common garter snakes are viviparous, or live bearing.

Phenology: Common garter snakes emerge from overwintering as early as early to late April or May, and remain active throughout the year through late September or October (or even later into the year if warmer temperatures persist or otherwise permit).

Conservation Status: WI Common, with no special protections, but regulated by the WI DNR. IUCN Red

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List Least Concern (LC).

Contact

Authored by Eric Roscoe. For any additional questions, comments, and/or concerns regarding this species, group of species, or this informational sheet, please email and contact the Madison Area Herpetological Society at info@madisonherps.org

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