



Plains Garter Snake (*Thamnophis radix*)

Tham-noe-fiss-rad-ix



Harmless/Nonvenomous

Description: 15 to 36 inches. Plains garter snakes are a moderately built garter snake with a ground color ranging from black, brown, to olive brown, and three lighter colored longitudinal stripes. The wide dorsal stripe usually ranges in color from yellow to orange, or orange-yellow while the lateral stripes are whitish, and cover scale rows 3 and 4. Some specimens may have a checkered patterning in between stripes. Dark barring is also present on labial scales. The belly, or ventral surface is pale cream colored, bluish gray, to pale yellow with small, dark flecks along the margins of the ventral scutes.

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

Infraorder: Alethinophidia

Family: Colubridae

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Subfamily: Natricinae

Genus: *Thamnophis*

Species: *Thamnophis radix**

*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. Common garter snakes (*Thamnophis sirtalis*) have lateral stripes part of scale rows 1, and all of 2 and 3. Ribbon snakes (*Thamnophis proximus*) and (*Thamnophis sauritus*) are generally much more slender bodied than garter snakes, have longer tails at the ventral scale, 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). radix-root.

Subspecies: None.

Range & Habitat: In Wisconsin, this species occupies south central and southeastern portions of the state. Plains garter snakes prefer open to semi open fields, prairies, vacant lots, and meadows along the margins of ponds, lakes, marshes, and other wetlands.

Habits & Natural History: Plains garter snakes are a medium sized, but heavily built garter snake that, as with other species of *Thamnophis*, tend to be diurnal predators of small fish, frogs, earthworms, and other invertebrates, and occasionally small mammals. The plains garter snake tends to be uncommon to locally common in Wisconsin, and emerges from hibernation in April or May. This species may hybridize with other species of garter snakes (such as the Butler's garter snake, *Thamnophis butleri*, and Common garter snake, *Thamnophis sirtalis*), which may make identification trickier in some locales. As with other garter snake species, plains garter snakes are viviparous, or live-bearing.

Phenology: Plains garter snakes emerge from overwintering as early as mid 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 Special Concern, regulated by the WI DNR. IUCN Red 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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