

Notable Natives

Garter Snakes

by Linda Novak

Many people are, at the least, mildly apprehensive when they come across a snake, but the common garter snake *Thamnophis sirtalis* is a good creature to have around and is likely to be heading away from you when you see it. Garter snakes eat insects, bird eggs, small birds, fish, amphibians and (here's the beneficial part) field mice and voles. They, in turn, serve as food for bull frogs, hawks, owls, foxes and other predators.

The most common snake in Illinois, the garter snake is dark brown or black with one to three yellow stripes running from head to tail. The Chicago type, *T. s. semifasciatus*, has some red on the body, and its side stripes become dashed lines near the head. The Chicago garter snake is found mainly in northeastern Illinois.

Adults can grow to more than three feet long and live for three to ten years if they are lucky enough to avoid a lawnmower or car. They spend the winter in hibernacula, holes in the ground below the frost line. Tolerant of cold weather, garter snakes may emerge on warm winter days to bask in the sun and then return to hibernation when temperatures fall. Sometimes these normally solitary animals form groups of up to ten individuals to stay warm in the winter. In the spring, the snakes emerge to mate.

The garter snake is one of the few snake species that doesn't lay eggs. It gives birth to live young which leave their mother as soon as they are born. A female can produce fifty to eighty babies a year, extending from July through October. The young are six to ten inches long when born.

Garter snakes are NOT poisonous. (There are only four poisonous snakes in Illinois, and they are rather rare in our area.) If you pick up a garter snake, it may become agitated, emit a foul-smelling liquid and/or try to bite. Its saliva is toxic to amphibians but not to humans. Still, it's best to leave them to their business.

In Illinois, you can distinguish between poisonous and nonpoisonous snakes by looking at the head (from a safe distance). All four of Illinois' poisonous snakes are pit vipers: cottonmouth, copperhead, massasauga rattlesnake and timber rattlesnake. Pit vipers have distinctive eyes with slit-shaped pupils and a pit-like organ located between the eyes and snout.



Garter snake. Image courtesy of Wikipedia Commons.

How does one avoid the unfortunate lawnmower-snake encounter? Garter snakes like to be warm, so they hang out on rocks, mulch and lawns – anywhere there is sun. Before you mow, try to scare them off by scuffling your feet through the grass in sunny areas, and then be vigilant.

Here are some interesting facts about garter snakes and snakes in general:

- Garter snakes get their name from the garters men used to wear to hold up socks. These garters were decorated with longitudinal stripes.
- There are thirteen subspecies of garter snake.
- Land snakes cannot move backwards.
- Snakes are not slimy. Their scales are made from a material similar to human fingernails.
- Snakes smell with their tongues, which is why they flick them.

If you find a garter snake on your property, consider yourself fortunate. They are a gardener's friend and may be a sign of a healthy environment.