



Western Terrestrial (Wandering) Garter Snake

Scientific name: *Thamnophis elegans vagrans*

This elegant little garter snake is a frequent visitor to many backyards throughout its range. The subspecies of Western Terrestrial Garter Snake found in B.C. commonly is called the “Wandering” Garter Snake. As with all garter snakes, the Wandering Garter Snake has strongly keeled scutes (each scale has a ridge running from front to back), giving it a dusty, dull appearance. The colour patterns vary throughout its range. In general, this snake has a grey body with a light stripe (usually yellow to orangish red) down its back, and a matching stripe running down each side. It also usually has a pattern of dark spots, about the size of the eraser on the back of a pencil, all over its back and over-lapping the stripes. This gives the stripes a wavy or zigzag pattern. Its belly is pale and may have dark blotches.

As with all snakes, it is best not to handle the Wandering Garter Snake. When a Garter Snake is handled (by a predator or a curious human), it can thrash its body about, spiralling over and over in an attempt to escape. However, its best escape tactic is the release of a smelly mix of musk and feces from its vent (the common opening to the reproductive and digestive tract). In addition, Wandering Garter Snakes will bite if feeling extremely threatened.

Making a living

Despite its abundance, relatively few details are known about the Wandering Garter Snake's natural history. Most Garter Snakes spend the winter in communal hibernacula (underground dens shared with other snakes, even other species of snakes), coming out in the warm days of spring to mate. Female Garter Snakes are live-bearing - their young are carried inside them and are born live. Females give birth to between 1 and 17 young in mid to late summer.

What's for dinner?

Wandering Garter Snakes eat almost anything that will fit in their mouth – as long as it's alive of course! They have the most varied diet of any snake in B.C. Most Wandering Garter Snakes eat slugs, small mammals, and fish. They also will eat amphibians, leeches, birds, and even other snakes. In coastal areas, these snakes may eat mainly fish, either fresh or salt water. Despite their terrestrial name, they can be very aquatic!

Wandering Garter Snakes have one hunting trick that other species of Garter Snakes don't share. When attacking large critters like adult rodents, this snake can coil its body around the prey as if constricting it, while simultaneously biting and chewing. Biologists discovered that these snakes have modified saliva glands that secrete a mild toxin (harmless to humans). By chewing on their prey with the enlarged teeth found in the back of their jaws, the snake injects the prey with toxin. Coiling around the prey subdues it and likely protects the predator (the snake) from possible injury inflicted by its prey!

Places and spaces

The Wandering Garter Snake can be found in most parts of southern B.C., including Vancouver Island, and as far north as the Peace River district.

They are very aquatic snakes, and are rarely found far from water, either fresh or marine. During the summer, these snakes prefer open areas like meadows and estuaries. Their winter hibernacula usually are in south-facing rocky outcrops, and they may have to travel quite far between their summer and winter homes, depending on the local availability of each.

Past, present, and...future?

Provincially, the Wandering Garter Snake is yellow-listed, which means this species is relatively abundant and currently not at risk of extinction.