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Exploring Our Little Corner of the World with the Galiano Naturalists

by Mike Hoebel

The most common reptiles that we see on Galiano are garter snakes, and three species of native garter snakes are found here. Each of these species displays so much individual variation in colour and pattern that it sometimes seems that each new garter snake you see must be a different species! The name “garter” snake comes from the observation that many (but not all) snakes belonging to the genus *Thamnophis* have stripes, which reminded someone of a garter.

The smallest garter snake on Galiano is the Northwestern Garter Snake (*Thamnophis ordinoides*). Adults of this species are less than 70 cm long, and their colouration and patterning are the most variable of all the garter snake species found here. Background colour is usually brown. This species usually has a stripe down the back, which may be coloured yellow, red, bluish, white, or cream, although the stripe may be entirely absent! These snakes also may have a stripe along each side of the body, which again may vary in colour. Luckily, there is one consistent field mark that distinguishes the Northwestern Garter Snake from the other two local species, and that is the presence of a pale upper lip. This field mark, together with the relatively small size of this snake, makes it possible to identify this species.

Another species found here is the Common Garter Snake (*Thamnophis sirtalis*). This snake may grow to be over one meter in length, and background colour is black or dark green. This species has a large head, which is black or reddish in

colour, and there is always a bright yellow or greenish yellow stripe down the back. In addition, Common Garter Snakes may have reddish stripes down the side, or reddish blotches on the side of the body.

Our third species is the Western Terrestrial Garter Snake (*Thamnophis elegans*). Adults can be up to one meter in length, but they are noticeably slender in body form. The background colour is usually grayish, and the snake may have a dusty or dull looking appearance. There is a light yellow stripe running down the back, and a yellowish stripe running down each side. A key field mark is the dark blotches which overlap the stripes on the back and sides, giving these stripes a wavy appearance. In spite of its name, this is the most aquatic of the three local species of garter snakes, and it is usually found near water, either freshwater or marine.

In common with all other snakes, garter snakes are carnivorous. They must kill their own prey, which they swallow whole, and they will not eat carrion. Prey for garter snakes includes slugs, small rodents, bird eggs or nestlings, and occasionally small fish if they can catch them. There is evidence that garter snakes have mild toxins in their saliva that help them immobilize and kill their prey, but these snakes don't have venom fangs or produce venom. Most garter snakes won't bite unless carelessly handled; the bite is minor and the saliva is harmless to people. However, if you pick up a garter snake be aware that a common defense reaction is the release from the animal's vent of a smelly combination of musk and feces!

In the fall garter snakes move to underground communal dens in rock piles or other sites that will be early to warm in the spring. Dozens of individual snakes of different ages and species may occupy the

same den (“hibernaculum”). In the spring the snakes emerge, which is when we begin to see them sunning themselves. The time of emergence is also the mating season, and several male garter snakes may pursue each fertile female. The mated females give birth to one to 30 live young later in the summer, and the small newborns are on their own from birth.

Garter snakes have relatively few predators. Large birds of prey may take them, but a major source of mortality is the automobile. It’s a shame that some people are frightened of these common animals and kill them on sight. Garter snakes are beautifully patterned, they are important predators of slugs that plague our gardens, and they are timid animals which always move away when approached by people. Like most gardeners I am pleased to share my garden with these fascinating creatures.

For more information about garter snakes (and much more) go to the Canadian Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Network website (www.carcnet.ca), or to the Reptiles of BC website (www.bcreptiles.ca).

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Natural Mysteries

Last month’s mystery was: With all that singing in the spring and early summer, do birds ever get laryngitis? The operatic vocalizations of spring birds are not produced in the larynx, as ours are; in fact, the bird larynx has no vocal chords. Instead, birds create the sounds for their songs in

their syrinx, a chamber of cartilage and vibrating soft structures located where the trachea splits after enter the chest. Like humans, though, birds modify the sounds to produce those pure high notes by adjusting the size and shape of the throat and lips, or rather, beak. When you watch the vibrating throat of a songbird, think of crude sounds coming from the syrinx being rounded and purified to shape those sweet notes.

This month’s Natural Mystery: What is that large white stain on the cliff face just west of Matthews Point? It looks like a lot of guano, but I never see any birds roosting there.

Have an answer? Send your thoughts to galianonaturalists@gulfislands.com. Have a Natural Mystery of your own? Let us know, and we’ll try to answer it.

THE GALIANO NATURALISTS are a group of curious explorers who enjoy observing, marveling, and sharing information about the natural world around us. Come join us. (galianonaturalists@gulfislands.com)