

Surprising Facts about Garter Snakes!

From the WA State Dept. of Fish & Wildlife

- Three species of garter snakes occur in Washington. Small garter snakes eat earthworms and slugs, and larger garter snakes include amphibians, small rodents, nestling birds, and fish in their diet.
- Garter snakes survive in suburbia and towns because they give birth to live young, and so do not require safe places for their eggs. Their name comes from their alleged resemblance to the garters once worn by men to hold up their socks.
- When disturbed, garter snakes will try to escape, but if threatened they may strike, bite, and smear foul-smelling anal secretions on your hands. A bite from one of these non-venomous snakes may be alarming, but will rarely break the skin.
- The **common garter snake** (*Thamnophis sirtalis*, Fig. 1) is found from coastal and mountain forests to sagebrush deserts, usually close to water or wet meadows or your garden. Next to the Northwestern garter snake, this species is the most frequently encountered snake. It has brightly colored stripes (yellow, green, blue) that run lengthwise along its body, and a grayish-blue underside. It grows to 2 to 3 feet.
- The **Northwestern garter snake** (*Thamnophis ordinoides*) is somewhat less widespread than its two cousins, preferring coastal and mountain forest habitats. However, it is commonly found in suburban areas and city parks. It's more slender than other garter snakes, reaching 2 feet at maturity. It is dark above and has stripes of varying colors, often red and orange.
- **Basking Sites:** Most snakes reach their preferred body temperature by basking on surfaces exposed to sun. They control their body temperature by moving in and out of the sunlight, and by changing their orientation to it (facing the sun, back to the sun, etc.). They also derive body heat by lying on or under warm surfaces.



In hot areas, look for snakes basking in the morning sun on asphalt, concrete, rocks, and wooden fences. In cooler regions, they can be seen basking throughout the day. Snakes tend to bask on sun-warmed roads in the evening, a fact that often leads to them being run over.

- **Droppings:** Snake droppings are interesting in that you will find a capping of white calcareous deposits at one end, as in the case of birds. The size of the droppings corresponds to the size of the animal. Snake droppings are cordlike, with constrictions and undulations.
- **Shed Snake Skin:** A growing snake sheds its skin every four to five weeks. You can tell when it is ready to shed—its eyes look bluish-white and dull. Snakes may even become temporarily blinded until the old skin splits at the head, and they are able to crawl out. Shed skin looks like thin, clear plastic, with every detail of the scales still visible, even the eyeball cover. Look for shed skin under boards, in rock piles, and other places where snakes congregate.