

MARITIME GARTER SNAKE

The garter snake's young are born alive and, in the case of the Maritime Garter Snake, the young are 5 5/16 inches to 7 1/2 inches (13.5 to 19 cm.). Usually the litter size is 40 or less but they have been known to have up to 85. The young are independent at birth. Conant and Collins (1991) note that adults can reach a length of 36 inches (almost a meter) when fully grown. Cook (1967) cites a report by Mellish (1876) in which a specimen of 4 feet 9 inches (1.44 meters) was recorded on P.E.I.

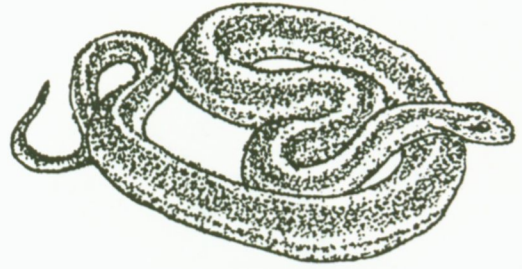
Garter snakes are carnivores (flesh eaters) and they feed on a wide variety of animals including frogs, toads, salamanders, fish, tadpoles, earthworms, birds eggs, young birds, small mammals, and dead animals. The backward-pointing needle sharp teeth help prevent larger prey from escaping.

The typical light lateral stripe on either side of the body is used to distinguish the various species of garter snakes. This stripe in the Maritime Garter Snake can be whitish, gray, or tan and it often merges into the darker shade below.

On the Island, garter snakes can be distinguished by their longitudinal stripes that display a wide variety of both colours and stripe patterns. The Maritime Garter Snake is a subspecies of the Eastern Garter Snake. Its back and side base colouration can range from cinnamon brown to yellowish-olive to olive gray. On this coloured base there are alternating rows of blackish or dark brownish spots in a checkered pattern. The belly is whitish on the front end and runs to dusky grey towards the back end.

The Island's garter snakes sometimes use dens or hibernacia, underground areas below the frost line where they spend the winter in a resting state. As the Island's habitats do not have many natural piles of broken rock or caves, the characteristics of these sites on the Island is worthy of investigation. The Society's spring workshops on amphibians and reptiles led to people reporting a number of hibernacia. These included the side of a stream bank in Hazelbrook, a sawdust pile near St. Charles, and a variety of Island stone basements. Any member who knows of a hibernacia is requested to report its location and the type of material it is in to the editor of the Island Naturalist.

Garter snakes usually mate in the early spring after emerging from hibernation but mating has been observed in fall as well. The young are born in late summer or early fall and they can reach maturity in their second year. These snakes usually move into cover very quickly when approached. Occasionally, they may hold their ground or even strike. The needle sharp teeth of a larger garter snake can pierce unprotected skin quite easily but their bite is not poisonous. Some redness and swelling usually accompanies a skin penetration as the teeth carry bacteria. These snakes are on the whole beneficial and should be left undisturbed.



eastern garter



*pattern variations
of eastern garter*