

HERPTILES OF P.E.I.

In this issue we continue the accounts of the herptiles of P.E.I. with the third and last group - the snakes.

PART III - THE SNAKES

Snakes are members of the class Reptilia. Their chief characteristic is an absence of limbs, but they also lack ear openings and movable eyelids. Snakes are able to move by means of large scales on the underside. The sides of a snake's jaws are separately hinged, enabling it to swallow larger prey than its mouth opening would normally permit. The teeth are small and curved backward into the mouth. The long forked tongue is harmless, used mainly as a receptor for sensory information.

Snakes are cold-blooded so in this part of the world must hibernate in winter. They either hatch from eggs or are born alive. Young snakes are not cared for after hatching. Small snakes, such as the ones we have on P.E.I., mature in one or two years. Skins are shed at least once a year to permit growth. Snakes feed on eggs or live animals - insects, worms, frogs, mice, rats and rabbits.

The classification of the three snake species recorded for P.E.I. (after Cook 1967) is as follows:

Class: Reptilia

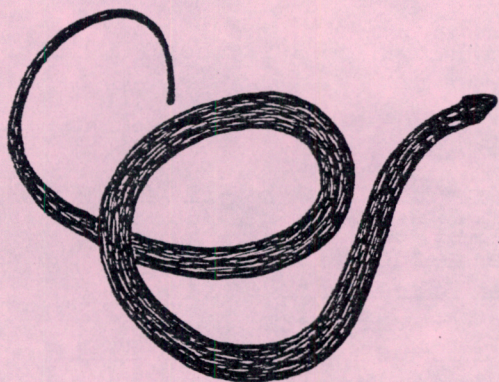
Order: Serpentes

Family: Colubridae

Storeria occipitomaculata occipitomaculata (Storer) - Northern Red-bellied Snake

Thamnophis sirtalis pallidula Allen - Maritime Garter Snake

Opheodrys vernalis vernalis (Harlan) - Eastern Smooth Green Snake



1. Northern Red-bellied Snake (Storeria occipitomaculata)

This small snake grows up to about 20 cm in length. Its back is brownish or slaty in colour and the belly is of some shade of red. Three light spots are found on the back of the head. The Red-bellied Snake hibernates in dry locations such as rock piles. They emerge in spring shortly after the snow disappears and may stay active until late in the fall. In the summer it lives under logs, stones, or old boards where it eats worms and soft insects. The young, of which there may be up to twenty, are born alive in late July, August, or early September. At birth they are from

six to sixteen centimeters long. This smallest of our Island snakes is retiring by nature, and is not frequently reported in the province.

2. Maritime Garter Snake (Thamnophis sirtalis)

Prince Edward Island Garter Snakes are brown, olive or grey with three light stripes and two rows of dark spots between the stripes. The undersides are lighter, although darkening toward the tail end. Garter Snakes average from