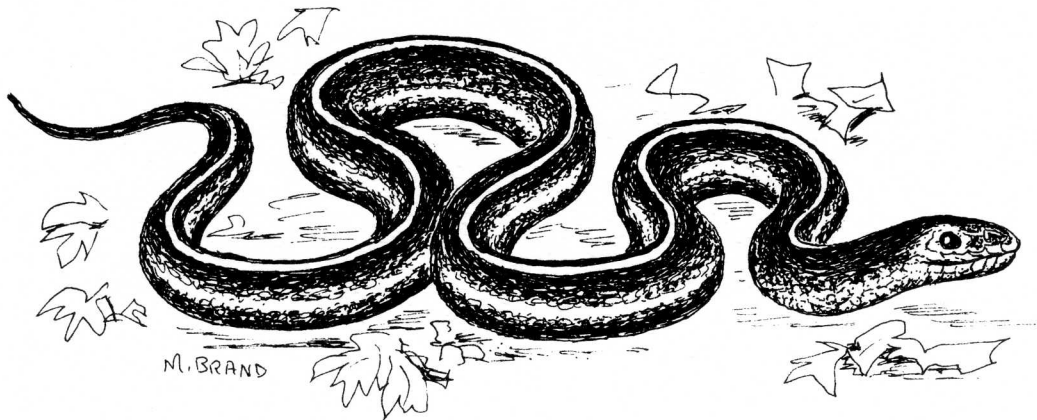


Naturalist Notebook

RIVER BEND NATURE CENTER

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Common Garter Snake

Thamnophis sirtalis

The common garter snake has the largest range and distribution of any snake in North America and can adapt to live in a diverse array of habitats, including ones in proximity to humans. For this reason, people commonly encounter garter snakes even in suburban environments. Garter snakes are also known to vary their diets from year to year, depending on what is available. In many ways the garter snake is one of the most adaptable creatures in Minnesota.

The best time of year to find a garter snake is in the spring when they have recently emerged from hibernation. The males usually come out first in large groups. The females emerge alone about a week later. Most of their time is spent basking in the sun and searching for mates. You may happen to see a mass of garter snakes in what is called a mating ball. A single female, who is much larger than the male, will be surrounded by as many as a hundred males vying for her attention.

Garter snakes get their name from the long stripes going down the length of the body, which resemble the garters men once wore to hold up their socks. The stripes help to disguise the snake as it moves through vegetation. This is only one mechanism garter snakes use to avoid predation. When confronted with danger, their first instinct is to hide but if they are backed into a corner, they will display a temper. If caught a garter snake will often bite and release a foul smelling odor, both of which are harmless to people.

Today, garter snakes are useful mainly for controlling rodent populations and giving children something to chase. Long ago, however, Cherokee Indians thought the garter snake useful for alleviating toothaches. According to legend, anyone with a toothache should hold a garter snake by the head and the tail and press their teeth down the length of the snake's body four times, without biting through the flesh.