

SNAKES are a very useful addition to any garden. Red-bellied and garter snakes are major predators of slugs. Snakes also prey on grubs, mice, rats, snails, leeches, centipedes and other invertebrates. In this way they play an important role in keeping pest populations under control.

Most of Canada's snakes are non-aggressive and shy. They will avoid encounters with humans whenever possible. However, like most wild creatures, snakes may bite in self-defence if handled, so it is best to leave them in peace.

The vast majority of Canada's snakes are non-venomous. Our rattlesnakes are the only ones that pose any serious danger. But again, although venomous, rattlesnakes are generally not aggressive and usually bite only when handled or accidentally stepped on.

Many snakes will emulate poisonous snakes as a form of defence. Some rustle their tail in dry vegetation to mimic the sound of a rattle, others resemble poisonous snakes in patterning rather than behaviour. Hognose snakes even spread their neck, inflate their body and hiss to impersonate a cobra. While these tactics may save harmless mimics from their natural predators, they have backfired where people are concerned. Many a harmless snake has been killed when mistaken for a venomous cousin.

There are 25 species of snakes in Canada. At least ... there were. One, the timber rattlesnake, is extirpated because of human persecution. It is no longer found in its historical range of southern Ontario. It is not our only snake species to suffer dwindling population numbers. Thirteen of our snake species are already listed by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada as at risk of extinction. Of the remaining 11 species, three have isolated populations or subspecies that are also considered at risk. Newfoundland and Labrador, the Yukon and Nunavut have no native snakes.

Despite their mostly harmless nature, many of our snakes have suffered from extensive harassment and needless killing by people. They are also threatened by habitat loss and even pesticide use. Cars on our ever-expanding roadways are now responsible for the deaths of great numbers of snakes. Ironically, as snakes have started to be seen in a more positive light, their collection for use as pets has become an increasing concern.

If you decide to check out your local snakes, be sure to treat them with respect. Examine them from a safe distance and do not handle them. Look at their size and pattern. Also pay attention to the natural range of each species; this will help you narrow down the possibilities when you are identifying a snake. Many snakes are secretive or nocturnal, but you may be lucky to find one basking in the sun on a warm rock.

Please visit our website at www.wildaboutgardening.org for information on how you can help snakes on your property.

EASTERN FOX SNAKE (*ELAPHE GLOYDI*)

RANGE: Southwestern Ontario.

DESCRIPTION: The eastern fox snake is a long (85 centimetres to 1.7 metres), yellow or pale brown snake with large dark brown blotches down the centre of its back and alternating smaller blotches along its sides. Its head is yellow underneath and red-brown on top with dark bars in-between, behind and below the eyes. The belly of the eastern fox snake is yellow with black checkering.

HABITAT: Always near water, usually marsh shorelines.

FAVOURITE PREY: Rodents that it kills by constriction.

ENCOUNTERS: Vibrates tail in dry vegetation. Secretes a strong-smelling liquid. Rarely bites.

QUEEN SNAKE (*REGINA SEPTENVITTATA*)

RANGE: Extreme southwestern Ontario.

DESCRIPTION: The queen snake is a short (40 to 60 centimetres), slender snake. It is light to dark brown and may have three to five very narrow dark stripes down its back that are often hard to see. There is a yellow stripe low along each side of its body. The belly of the queen snake is a creamy yellow with four brown stripes. It has a yellow chin and lips.

HABITAT: Shorelines.

FAVOURITE PREY: Crayfish.

ENCOUNTERS: Active day or night.

NIGHT SNAKE (*HYPsiglena TORQUATA*)

RANGE: Southern British Columbia.

DESCRIPTION: The night snake is a small (30 to 50 centimetres), slender snake with a flat and somewhat triangular head. It has dark eye stripes and vertical pupils. It is grey or yellowish-brown with darker blotches down its back and sides. The night snake has three large dark blotches on the back and sides of its neck that may be fused into one. Its belly is yellow or yellowish. It is Canada's only rear-fanged snake with teeth far in the back of its upper jaw.

HABITAT: Bushy desert and sandy, rocky and dry grasslands.

FAVOURITE PREY: Small rodents, lizards and frogs.

ENCOUNTERS: When threatened, it raises its head, weaves, hisses and flattens its neck. It is venomous, but not considered dangerous to humans. It rarely attempts to bite.

HOGNOSE SNAKES •

- **EASTERN HOGNOSE SNAKE (*HETERODON PLATIRHINOS*)**
RANGE: Southern Ontario.

- **WESTERN HOGNOSE SNAKE (*HETERODON NASICUS*)**
RANGE: Southern Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba.

DESCRIPTION: Western and eastern hognose snakes are relatively long (40 centimetres to one metre), heavy snakes with broad necks, a flattened head and upturned snout. The western's snout is more sharply upturned. Westerns are tan, grey or yellowish with large dark blotches down their backs and alternating smaller blotches along their sides. Easterns have a large dark patch on each side of the head and a white belly with dark patches, except under the tail where it's solid white.

HABITAT: Sandy or gravelly meadows, prairies or bushy areas. Burrows into loose soil.

FAVOURITE PREY: Toads.

ENCOUNTERS: Their defensive tactic is to spread their neck, inflate their body and hiss loudly before striking. They always strike with their mouth closed and are not known to bite. They will also roll on their back, writhe violently for a few moments, then lie still with their mouth open and play dead.

RED-BELLIED SNAKE (*STORERIA OCCIPITOMACULATA*)

RANGE: Southeastern Saskatchewan to Nova Scotia.

DESCRIPTION: The red-bellied snake is short (20 to 40 centimetres) and brown, grey or black. It has two dark stripes along its back, a dark strip low on each side and a red or orange belly. There are three light brown or yellow spots on the back and sides of the neck.

HABITAT: Edges of wooded areas.

FAVOURITE PREY: Slugs, snails, earthworms, insects.

ENCOUNTERS: Secretive. Hides under rocks, logs or other debris. When startled or threatened, it will curl its upper lip and show teeth. Rarely bites, but releases a foul-smelling liquid.

EASTERN MILK SNAKE

(*LAMPROPELTIS TRIANGULUM TRIANGULUM*)

RANGE: Southern Ontario and Quebec.

DESCRIPTION: The eastern milksnake is of medium length (60 to 90 centimetres), slender and cream, tan or light grey. It also has a row of blotches — brown or reddish-brown and lined in black — down its back, and smaller alternating blotches low on its sides. The eastern milksnake has a light coloured Y- or V-shaped patch on the back of its neck. Its belly has a black and white checkerboard pattern.

HABITAT: Forest edges and agricultural areas.

FAVOURITE PREY: Mice that it kills by constriction.

ENCOUNTERS: Secretive. Not usually seen except at night. If cornered, will vibrate tail in vegetation. Will bite and spray musk if handled.

NORTHERN BROWN SNAKE (*STORERIA DEKAYI DEKAYI*)

RANGE: Southwestern Ontario and southern Quebec.

DESCRIPTION: The northern brown snake is small (25 to 50 centimetres), light grey-brown to red-brown and has a faint light stripe down its back that's bordered by two rows of dark spots. There may be narrow lines joining the spots. The head of the northern brown snake shows a dark downward bar just behind the eye and another smaller bar just below the eye. Its belly is a light cream or pinkish.

HABITAT: Always near water in marshes or woodlands.

FAVOURITE PREY: Slugs.

ENCOUNTERS: Very adept at hiding.

NORTHERN WATER SNAKE (*NERODIA SIPEDON*)

RANGE: Southern Ontario and Quebec.

DESCRIPTION: The northern water snake is a relatively long (55 centimetres to 1.35 metres), thick-bodied snake that varies in colour, but is generally grey or brown. Dark crossbands on the neck and front part of the body turn into alternating back and side blotches towards the tail.

As the northern water snake ages, it darkens so that its markings are less discernible. Its belly is cream with black or reddish crescent markings.

HABITAT: Streams, rivers, lakes, marshes.

FAVOURITE PREY: Dead and diseased fish, destructive lamprey eels, tadpoles, smaller fish.

ENCOUNTERS: Retreats to water if it can, otherwise secretes a musk and may bite.

SHARPTAIL SNAKE (*CONTIA TENUIS*)

RANGE: Only Vancouver Island and some Gulf Islands in southwestern British Columbia.

DESCRIPTION: The sharptail snake is a short (20 to 45 centimetres), grey or reddish-brown snake with a yellow or red stripe along each side. It has smooth scales, a rounded snout, a light chin and dark brown colouring on top of its head. The belly of the sharptail snake has alternating crossbars of white or cream with black. Its tail ends in a sharp point.

HABITAT: Open forest, meadows, moist areas.

FAVOURITE PREY: Slugs.

ENCOUNTERS: Nocturnal and very secretive, this snake retreats underground when it's dry and is most active when it's rainy.

RATTLESNAKES •

- **WESTERN RATTLESNAKE (*CROTALUS OREGANUS*)**
RANGE: Southern British Columbia (dry interior belt), southeastern Alberta, southern Saskatchewan.

- **MASSASAUGA RATTLESNAKE (*SISTRURUS CATENATUS*)**
RANGE: Southwestern Ontario.

DESCRIPTION: Our rattlesnakes are medium (50 to 75 centimetres for the massasauga) to long (60 centimetres to 1.6 metres for the western), stout snakes with a rattle at the end of their tail. They have wide heads with a heat-sensitive pit on each side between the eye and nostril. The massasauga is brownish-grey; the western is tan or olive. Both have dark rounded blotches — with light coloured edges in westerns — running down the back and smaller blotches along the sides. The massasauga has a large dark bar running horizontally back from each eye, and a black belly with light markings. The western rattlesnake has a yellowish-white belly.

HABITAT: Massasaugas prefer to be near water, but western rattlesnakes like dry open areas with burrows, rocks or talus slopes for shelter.

FAVOURITE PREY: Mice and rats that they kill using venom.

ENCOUNTERS: They will try to avoid encounters by relying on their pattern and staying motionless to go undetected. If caught in the open, they will coil, vibrate their rattle and possibly strike. They will bite if handled or accidentally stepped on, so use protective clothing — and caution — in rattlesnake territory.

GOPHER SNAKE (*PITUOPHIS CATENIFER*)

RANGE: Southern Alberta, British Columbia, Saskatchewan.

DESCRIPTION: The gopher snake is a large (90 centimetres to 2.5 metres), heavy-bodied snake. It is pale or greyish-yellow with brown, black or reddish-brown rectangular blotches down its back alternating with smaller blotches along its sides. These turn into crossbands near the tail. The gopher snake has a narrow snout and several dark bands between the eyes, angling down behind and vertically below each eye. It has a yellowish belly, often with darker spots.

HABITAT: Dry woodlands, grasslands, prairie.

FAVOURITE PREY: Rodents.

ENCOUNTERS: When threatened, it will coil up, hiss loudly, vibrate its tail in vegetation and strike. Painful bite, but not poisonous.

BLACK RAT SNAKE (*ELAPHE OBSOLETA OBSOLETA*)

RANGE: Southern Ontario.

DESCRIPTION: The black rat snake is large (one to two metres), shiny and black with a whitish belly with black markings. It has a white throat, chin and upper lip. These snakes may sometimes show a faint blotched pattern.

HABITAT: Prefers edge habitats such as forest edges, but also uses sloped valleys. A great climber.

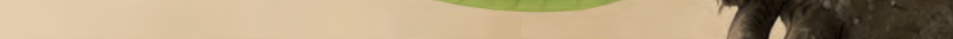
FAVOURITE PREY: Mice, rats and bird eggs or nestlings. It suffocates prey by constriction.

ENCOUNTERS: Vibrates tail in dry vegetation. Will strike if cornered, but bite is harmless.

BLACK RAT



SMOOTH GREEN



BUTLER'S GARTER



EASTERN RIBBON GARTER



COMMON GARTER



NORTHWESTERN GARTER



PLAINS GARTER



WESTERN TERRESTRIAL GARTER



NORTHERN RINGNECK



RACER



RUBBER BOA



SMOOTH GREEN SNAKE (*OPHEODRYS VERNALIS*)

RANGE: Southeast Saskatchewan to Nova Scotia.

DESCRIPTION: The smooth green snake is a short (30 to 50 centimetre) snake that is true to its name with bright green colouring and smooth scales that give it a shiny appearance. Its belly and upper lip are white or pale yellow. Young smooth green snakes are darker in colouring.

HABITAT: Meadows and grassy clearings.

FAVOURITE PREY: Insects, spiders, slugs, snails.

ENCOUNTERS: Rarely bites, but will sometimes make a false strike. Secretes a foul-smelling substance when threatened.

GARTER SNAKES •

- **BUTLER'S GARTER SNAKE (*THAMNOPHIS BUTLERI*)**
RANGE: Southwestern Ontario.

- **EASTERN RIBBON SNAKE (*THAMNOPHIS SAURITUS*)**
RANGE: Southern Ontario, Nova Scotia.

- **COMMON GARTER SNAKE (*THAMNOPHIS SIRTALIS*)**
RANGE: Northwest Territories, British Columbia to Prince Edward Island (not in Newfoundland).

- **NORTHWESTERN GARTER SNAKE (*THAMNOPHIS ORDINOIDES*)**
RANGE: Coastal southwestern British Columbia, including Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands.

- **PLAINS GARTER SNAKE (*THAMNOPHIS RADIX*)**
RANGE: Southern Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba.

- **WESTERN TERRESTRIAL GARTER SNAKE (*THAMNOPHIS ELEGANS*)**
RANGE: Southern British Columbia, southern Alberta, southwestern Saskatchewan.

DESCRIPTION: Most garters are slender and small (35 to 70 centimetres), but the plains and western terrestrial garter snakes are longer (45 centimetres to one metre). They vary in colour from brown, green or grey to black. Each has a stripe down its back and one down each side in yellow, orange, red, brown or greenish, depending on the species and the individual. The northwestern, plains, western terrestrial and some common garter snakes have two rows of dark spots between the stripes, which can give them a checkerboard appearance.

Butler's garter snakes have a yellow belly and a pale spot in front of each eye.

The side stripes of the eastern ribbon snake are higher up, leaving a black line between them and the light yellow-green belly. There is also light colouring on the chin and a spot in front of each eye.

Some common garter snakes may be all black with no stripes at all. In western areas, common garters may have small red bars or blotches on their sides.

Northwestern garter snakes have a blunt snout, pale chin and upper lip, and a grey or yellow belly that is often blotched with red.

The plains garter snake has light coloured lips with black bars.

The western terrestrial garter has a whitish chin, throat and upper lip. Its belly is greyish with black markings.

HABITAT: Meadows, prairies and other open areas, usually near water.

FAVOURITE PREY: Slugs, earthworms, leeches and frogs.

ENCOUNTERS: Shy. Often flees or takes to the water if approached. Releases a foul-smelling substance when captured and may bite in self-defence.

NORTHERN RINGNECK SNAKE (*DIADOPHIS PUNCTATUS EDWARDSII*)

RANGE: Southern Ontario to Prince Edward Island.

DESCRIPTION: The northern ringneck snake is a short (25 to 60 centimetres), slender, smooth-scaled snake that is blue, grey or black. It has an orange-yellow belly and a characteristic yellow, cream or orange neck ring. The chin and upper lip of the ringneck snake is also cream or yellow.

HABITAT: Grasslands, open forest, usually under rocks or logs.

FAVOURITE PREY: Salamanders.

ENCOUNTERS: This gentle, secretive snake is active at night. It will coil its tail tightly and lift it to display its bright belly if threatened. It rarely bites, but will secrete a foul-smelling substance.

RACER (*COLUBER CONSTRUCTOR*)

RANGE: Southern British Columbia, southern Saskatchewan, Ontario (Peelee Island).

DESCRIPTION: The racer is slender and long (60 centimetres to 1.9 metres). It has smooth scales and a uniform colouring, although young racers may have spots or blotches. There are several subspecies in Canada. In Ontario, the blue racer is grey to greenish blue with a white throat, chin and upper lip, and a dark bar through its eye. The western subspecies are more variable with brown, grey or olive colouring, a yellow belly and pale-yellow chin and upper lip.

HABITAT: Open, sparsely treed areas.

FAVOURITE PREY: Frogs, lizards, snakes, small mammals, insects, birds.

ENCOUNTERS: Vibrates tail in dead vegetation. Will strike directly and bite if grabbed.

RUBBER BOA (*CHARINA BOTTAE*)

RANGE: Southern British Columbia.

DESCRIPTION: The rubber boa is a short (35 to 73 centimetres), stout snake with a blunt, rounded head and small eyes with vertical pupils. True to its name, smooth scales and wrinkly skin give it a rubbery appearance. It's a uniform olive, brown or grey with a yellow belly.

HABITAT: Damp woodlands and grassy areas with numerous rotting logs, rocks and/or burrows.

FAVOURITE PREY: Small mammals killed by constriction.

ENCOUNTERS: When alarmed, rolls into a ball with head in centre and tail sticking out.



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