

Giant Garter Snake

Thamnophis gigas

Reptile

Scientific Name

Thamnophis gigas

Other Names

None

Range

Central California in parts of Sutter, Sacramento, Butte, Colusa, Glenn, Yolo and San Joaquin Counties

Habitat

Marshes, sloughs, drainage canals, agricultural fields and irrigation ditches

Average Size

Length: 36 – 65 in.

Weight: 1 – 2 lbs.

Description

Large, olive brown to black snake with a yellow dorsal stripe and two yellowish-orange stripes along the length of the body.

Lifespan

In the wild: 6 – 10 years

In captivity: 12+ years

Diet

In the wild: fish, frogs, toads and tadpoles

In captivity: fish

Offspring

10 – 40 live young

Gestation

2 – 3 months

Sexual Maturity

Males: 3 years

Females: 5 years

Predators

Egrets, herons, hawks, large fish, and introduced American Bullfrogs

Population Status

Vulnerable



Behavior

This species of snake is active from early spring to mid-autumn, spending the winter months in an underground burrow. Although Giant garter snakes are diurnal (active during daylight), and are often found basking on rocks or in vegetation close to the waters' edge, during the hot summer months they become more nocturnal in their hunting habits. Shy and reclusive, these highly aquatic snakes take to the water at the slightest disturbance as their wide open habitat provides little protection from aerial predators.

Reproduction and Breeding

Mating takes place in the spring, March through May, soon after emergence from their underground wintering sites. Males will mate with a variety of females with females having live birth from late July to early September. Like most snakes, newborn Giant Garter Snakes receive no parental care, and must disperse into dense cover immediately after birth to avoid predators. The young are precocial (able to survive on their own at birth).

Conservation

The Giant Garter Snake is considered a threatened species due to loss of habitat throughout its range. In addition to introduced predatory fish and bullfrogs, degradation and fragmentation of wetlands in the Central Valley for agricultural use have seriously reduced their habitat options. In the San Joaquin Valley alone, it is estimated that the Giant Garter Snake has lost 98 percent of its original range. Pesticide and fertilizer runoff from agriculture are responsible for killing some of this snake's prey, including native Red-legged Frogs.

Protected waterfowl habitats in wildlife refuges can be an important habitat source for this snake, but they are not ideal as they are flooded in winter and drained in summer, the opposite of this snake's needs. Rice fields and irrigation ditches, which are both flooded in summer, are now providing good habitat for this snake.

The Sacramento Zoo's Veterinary Medicine Department participates in the Giant Garter Snake Recovery Program by giving physicals and placing transmitters into wild Giant Garter Snakes so that their movements and behaviors can be tracked in an effort to better understand their survival needs.

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Amazing Facts

When disturbed, the Giant Garter Snake emits a foul-smelling musk from its cloaca.

Garter snakes have toxins in their saliva which can be deadly to their prey. Though their bite might produce an unpleasant reaction in humans, they are not considered dangerous.

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