

BOGDIVERSITY THURSDAY



—from Head Naturalist Clinton

Common Gartersnake

POST #3—September 16, 2021

The Sax-Zim Bog may not be an epicenter of reptile diversity in North America, or even in Minnesota, but the species we have are amazing in their own right. There are two species of snakes and three species of turtle found in the Sax-Zim Bog and today we are taking a look at one of the snakes: Common Gartersnake!

Common Gartersnake is one of the most widespread reptiles in North America, ranging from the east to the west coast, south to Texas and Florida, and into northern Canada. A cold tolerant species, Common Gartersnake is the most northerly distributed snake in North America. This snake has at least 13 subspecies that range dramatically in color and pattern. There are two subspecies of Common Gartersnake found in the Sax-Zim Bog: Eastern Gartersnake (*Thamnophis sirtalis sirtalis*) and Red-sided Gartersnake (*T. s. parietalis*).

A habitat generalist, Common Gartersnakes are found in upland and lowland forests, prairies, rocky shorelines, and everywhere in between. Important to the survival of this species is not just

abundant prey, primarily amphibians and worms, but access to hibernacula sites!

A hibernaculum is a location, often a burrow or other underground site, that a species uses to spend the winter. These locations could be old animal burrows, cracks in building foundations, or even ant mounds. Common Gartersnakes use these sites, by the thousands in some cases, to survive cold northern winters and will typically mate at these locations in the spring. Lately, there have been lots of Common Gartersnakes moving around the roadsides and trails in the Sax-Zim Bog, perhaps starting to locate hibernacula sites.

Common Gartersnakes do not lay eggs, but instead give birth to live young with litters typically ranging from 10-25 young. These newborns are around 5-7 inches in length and are on their own from birth. Adult Common Gartersnakes range in size from 16-26 inches, with males being smaller than females. The largest documented gartersnake in Minnesota was an exceptional individual: a 41 inch long female found in Fillmore County!

More information about this widespread and abundant species is included in the photos below!

(Photos by Head Naturalist Clinton and Rubin Stenseng)



Common Gartersnakes are habitat generalists and effective amphibian predators. Like many colubrid snakes, gartersnakes have a Duvernoy's gland which secretes a neurotoxin, similar to venom. This secretion is not harmful to humans and helps subdue and swallow prey that has been captured.



Eastern Gartersnake (*Thamnophis sirtalis sirtalis*) is the expected subspecies of Common Gartersnake found throughout the Sax-Zim Bog. This subspecies can be variable, but is typically black with yellow stripes and lacks any banding on the upper lip. When threatened, gartersnakes puff up their bodies, flatten their heads, and strike frequently at perceived threats.



Red-sided Gartersnake (*Thamnophis sirtalis parietalis*) is a fairly uncommon subspecies in northern Minnesota and is seen much more frequently in southern and western Minnesota. This subspecies has obvious red markings along its flanks and can be found well into the western United States.



Common Gartersnakes are quite cold tolerant and may be seen emerging from hibernacula sites in early April and are active well into October. This small individual was caught on a mild October day in the Sax-Zim Bog.