

common gartersnake *Thamnophis sirtalis*

Kingdom: Animalia

Division/Phylum: Chordata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Family: Natricidae

ILLINOIS STATUS common, native

FEATURES

The common gartersnake averages 18 to 26 inches in length. The name “gartersnake” comes from the striped appearance of the back, similar to that of the garters that were once commonly used to support men’s socks. The appearance is variable. There are usually three stripes on the back that are often yellow but may be other colors. The belly is green or yellow with two rows of indistinct black spots. The scales are keeled (ridged).

BEHAVIORS

The common gartersnake may be found statewide in Illinois. This animal lives in meadows, marshes, woodlands, hillsides, stream edges and vacant city lots. The common gartersnake is terrestrial. Active during the day, it will climb and swim. It hides under vegetation, boards or other objects on the ground. When alarmed, it may flatten its body and release an unpleasant musk from glands at the base of the tail. It overwinters in rock crevices or in the burrows of other animals. Mating occurs in early spring. Young are born alive in the period late summer through early fall. The female gives birth to between 15 and 80 young at one time, depending on her size and age. This snake eats earthworms, frogs, toads, salamanders, insects, mice and small birds.

HABITATS

Aquatic Habitats

bottomland forests; lakes, ponds and reservoirs; marshes; rivers and streams; swamps; wet prairies and fens

Woodland Habitats

bottomland forests; coniferous forests; southern Illinois lowlands; upland deciduous forests

Prairie and Edge Habitats

black soil prairie; edge

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