

Common garter snake

Thamnophis sirtalis

Most grownups have a dislike for snakes. Our culture teaches us to fear them because of their image as cold-blooded killers and of what they represent: a hidden, untamed wilderness. Children, however, have a lively curiosity about snakes. They handle them without fear.

There are many popular misconceptions about snakes, but these can be easily overcome.

Myth: Snakes are wet and slimy.

Truth: Snakes are covered with scales that serve the same purpose as our skin; to keep them dry and protect them from infection. Scales on the underside of the snake are elongated and specially designed for gripping dirt, rocks, tree bark, or whatever else the snake may need to climb over.

Myth: Snakes are out to get us.

Truth: Most snakes are harmless; and many of them are highly beneficial to mankind. Snakes are generally shy animals found under boulders, rotting logs, and other flat objects such as lumber, sheets of metal or roofing material lying on the ground. Snakes have much more to fear from humans. Modern agriculture has greatly reduced their habitat. Many of them are killed by mowers or reapers, and by automobiles on the highways. Most snakes are valuable because they eat great numbers of mice, rats, gophers and other “pests.”

Myth: All snakes are poisonous and deadly.

Truth: There are very few species of poisonous snakes - only four are found in Illinois (that's only 3% of all North American species) - and, it's extremely rare to encounter one in the Chicago region.

Snakes vary in their hunting strategies. Smaller snakes prey largely upon insects, earthworms, frogs, toads, or fish and other aquatic animals. Other snakes kill their prey by squeezing it and are called “constrictors.” The poisonous snakes kill by injecting their prey with venom through their fangs. They strike their prey, then track it as the venom takes effect. The really large snakes merely seize an animal in their mouth and gradually swallow it alive and whole. Of the 32 species of snakes found in Illinois, only 18 are present in the Chicago area and only six of these may be called “common.” None of these are poisonous.

If you see a snake and are frightened, it's best to move away if you can and just let it be. Remember that snakes are extremely valuable in nature as both predator and prey, consuming rodents, amphibians and insects and providing food for a variety of birds and mammals.

Snake Fun Facts:

- Snakes are ectothermic. On cold days they will bask in the sun to warm their bodies.
- Snakes smell the air with their tongue. They can't sting with their tongue like some people think.
- As snakes grow they must shed their outer skin. Most do this several times each year.
- Although they lack legs, snakes are agile and can climb trees and even swim in water.
- Snakes have no eyelids and cannot blink.

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