

**GIANT GARTER SNAKE
(THAMNOPHIS GIGAS)**



Description

The giant garter snake is one of the largest garter snakes, reaching a total length of at least 64 inches (5 feet; about 1 meters). Females are slightly longer and heavier than males. Background coloration varies from brownish to olive with a checkered pattern of black spots, separated by a yellow stripe down the back and a light-colored stripe down each side. Coloration varies depending on location and the individual snake. Individuals in the northern

Sacramento Valley tend to be darker with more pronounced stripes, with the lower surface cream to olive or brown, and sometimes with orange.

This species requires adequate water during its active season, from early spring through mid fall, to provide food and cover; emergent wetland vegetation, such as cattails and bulrushes, for escape cover and foraging habitat during its active season; grassy banks and openings in waterside vegetation for basking; and higher elevation uplands for cover and refuge from flood waters during its dormant season in the winter. Giant garter snakes use small mammal burrows and other soil crevices above flood elevations during its winter dormancy period.

Habitat

Giant garter snakes are found only in wetlands of the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys. They inhabit marshes, sloughs, ponds, small lakes, slow streams, and other waterways and agricultural wetlands, such as irrigation and drainage canals and rice fields. Giant garter snakes feed on small fishes, tadpoles, and frogs.

Range/distribution

The giant garter snake occurs, or once occurred, in Colusa, Fresno, Glenn, Kern, Madera, Merced, Sacramento, San Joaquin, Sutter, and Yolo counties.

Photo: USGS Western Ecological Research Center from URL: <http://www.werc.usgs.gov/dixon/snake.html>.

Federal/California status: Threatened/Threatened