

For goodness, snakes

Slithering creatures linger in backyards, gardens

BY REBECCA LEXA

One of the great things about the Columbia-Pacific region is just how much wild-life is abundant in the area. Even most of the region's developed areas have a good amount of green space that attracts not just birds and small animals, but elk, deer and occasionally even black bears.

Some of these animals are a little easier for most folks to live with than others, and the feeling is mutual, since some species are less tolerant of us.

Among those commonly found in yards are garter snakes. Two species are common throughout the region, the common garter snake and the northwestern garter snake.

Both species often appear as very dark green with slender pale stripes running down the length of their bodies. Their heads are small with a gently tapered end and their eyes have round pupils. Even the longest specimens, which may be up to 4 1/2 feet in the case of the common garter snake, rarely reach more than a few inches in circumference. When upset, garter snakes may emit a smelly musk to drive off danger, however, they rarely bite.

They do have very small teeth that become slightly larger toward the back of the mouth. Contrary to popular opinion, garter snakes are venomous, but their venom is weak enough to only be a little irritating to humans at the most. It does a good job of helping them subdue their prey, though.

Both of these regional garter snake species can be highly variable in color. In addition to the classic green hue with pale yellow stripes, they may show stripes or specks of red and blue. A frequently seen morph of the northwestern garter snake features dark green with only one stripe, or none at all. The red-spotted subspecies of common garter snake has bright red checkered spots in between its stripes.

The snakes' variability in color can sometimes make it difficult to tell the difference between the two species. Northwestern garter snakes are usually smaller than common garter snakes. The latter species' head is a little more robust than the northwestern garter's head, which isn't much wider than the neck. The common garter snake's eyes are also bigger in proportion to its head.

Habitat sometimes differs between the



Photos by Rebecca Lexa

A small garter snake is held by a doorway.

two species. Common garter snakes are more attracted to water, where they may hunt tadpoles and minnows along with terrestrial prey. Northwestern garter snakes usually stick to wooded areas and nearby clearings where they hunt a variety of invertebrates, frogs and birds. It's not uncommon to find both species in the same area, though.

In addition to these two species, some anecdotal reports of the rubber boa snake have surfaced, particularly around Cape Disappointment State Park. iNaturalist, a species identification database, doesn't currently show any observations of this species further west than the eastern slopes of the Coast Range, though it's not for lack of suitable habitat. They are much more nocturnal than garter snakes, so less likely to be sighted, and their plain brown color makes wonderful camouflage for them if spotted during the day.

Some are still resistant to all snake species, which is difficult since garter snakes tend to do well in yards and gardens. It's important to remember that garter snakes are harmless to humans, and that even venomous snakes just want to be left alone. Moreover, gardeners should be glad to see these reptiles around, as they hunt the slugs that go after vegetables and other plants, and also keep some other pesky critters in check.

Finally, please don't handle these snakes more than necessary. While they are less aggressive than some other species, handling can be very stressful for them. It can lead to potentially fatal injuries for the snake. Appreciate them from a respectful distance, and allow these remarkable little reptiles the space and safety they need to live their lives.

Rebecca Lexa is a naturalist, nature educator, tour guide and writer living on the Long Beach Peninsula. Find more about her work at rebeccalex.com.



TOP: A northwestern garter snake, commonly seen in the Columbia-Pacific region. ABOVE: A northwestern garter snake slithers along a rocky surface.