



neighborhood naturalist

Nature you can find in town and the nearby countryside

Corvallis, Oregon

Summer 2004

Sssummer Sssnakes

Two of the most common snake species in the mid-Willamette Valley are the Gopher Snake and the Common Garter Snake. Rattlesnakes were once prevalent here but now are almost extinct. While Gopher and Common Garter Snakes are common throughout most of North America, local varieties have distinctive colors and/or adaptations, which make them particularly fascinating.

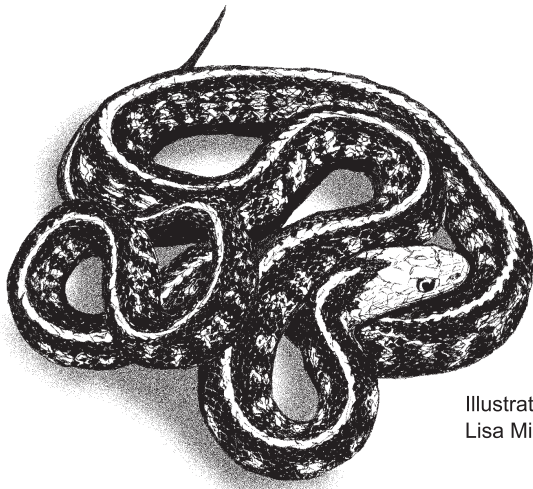


Illustration by
Lisa Millbank

Red-spotted Garter Snake

Thamnophis sirtalis concinnus

The Common Garter is especially adapted to eat the poisonous Rough-skinned Newt and our subspecies has striking coloration.

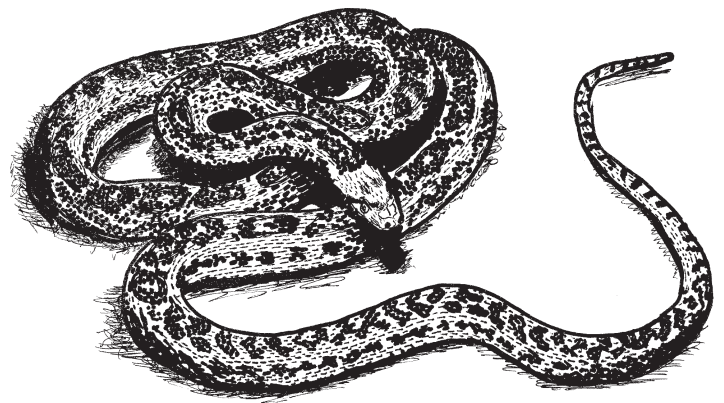
The three garter snake species found here are the Western Terrestrial, Northwestern and Common Garter Snakes. The Common Garter Snake is most widespread and the local population is quite striking in coloration. They have an orange head, black back, yellow dorsal stripe and red spots on the sides. Because of this, they are referred to as the Red-spotted Garter Snake. They are typically less than four feet long.

Newt Eater

The Red-spotted Garter Snake is resistant to the poisonous Rough-skinned Newt. These newts have numerous skin glands which secrete poison. Any predator, such as a bird,

mammal or other snake, is killed when the newt is eaten and most all predators in our area recognize the newt as dangerous. The toxin does affect the garter snake, but only by slowing it down for a few days. Because of this, the snake may prefer less afflictive prey. During lean times when other prey are scarce, the garter snake eats newts. The newt and the snake have coevolved to the point where, in order to deter toxin-resistant garter snakes, the newts are so toxic that eating one newt can kill an adult human. Touching a newt may not affect you at all but it's a wise precaution to wash your hands after handling one.

The diet of the Red-spotted Garter Snake is varied and dependent on available prey. Young snakes often feed on earthworms while adults prefer frogs, tadpoles, salamanders, newts and small fish. Other prey may include snails, slugs, leeches, small birds and small mammals. Rarely do they eat insects, spiders or other snakes.



Pacific Gopher Snake (Bull Snake)

Pituophis catenifer catenifer

This is the largest snake you will likely encounter here. They are harmless and important in controlling rodent populations.

Adult gopher snakes may surpass four feet in length, but around here they are commonly between three and

See "Gopher Snake" on next page

Gopher Snake *continued from front page*

four feet. They are also called “Bull Snakes,” but the name “Gopher Snake” is quite fitting since they do like to eat gophers. They eat a wide range of small mammals and birds and hunt by investigating burrows, brush and debris. The Gopher Snake is widespread across North America. Our subspecies, the Pacific Gopher Snake, is darker overall than Gopher Snakes in most other regions (including the central Oregon deserts).

Rattlesnake Impostor

Rattlesnakes have been largely eradicated by misguided attempts to protect humans and livestock. In the Willamette Valley, rattlesnakes are almost extinct. You may experience them vicariously through the Gopher Snake, which does a superficial impersonation when threatened. The pattern on the body and head of the Gopher Snake is similar to the rattlesnake and in a defense display, it widens its jaw (making the head look rattlesnake-like), coils its body and wiggles its tail (which can sound like rattling against dry vegetation). At the same time, the snake may make a deep, loud hiss. The message is clear, “Get away!”

Snakes here are not dangerous

Other than the extremely rare rattlesnakes, there are no other venomous snakes in the Willamette Valley. Other snakes will only bite if carelessly handled, with little lasting affect other than the surprise and a good story. Avoid handling snakes, they are delicate creatures and can be harmed easily.

Where to look for a snake

Garter and Gopher snakes maybe found year-round but especially from Spring to Fall. Garter snakes live near water or moist areas in the forest or open areas. Gopher snakes tend toward drier or rocky areas. In either case, they like to sun themselves on rocks, gravel or pavement. Be cautious while driving. During high summer, when the temperature is high, you may only find them sunning in the cool morning. In spring, when the ground is still cool, they need to sun themselves more often.

One of the best places is E.E. Wilson State Game Area north of Corvallis a few miles in Adair Village. It's on the east side of Highway 99W from the Coffin Butte Landfill. The Red-spotted Garter Snakes are particularly colorful there. Gopher snakes live there too. These are common snakes, any area that is overgrown and relatively undisturbed may yield snakes.

Put out a “snake tin”

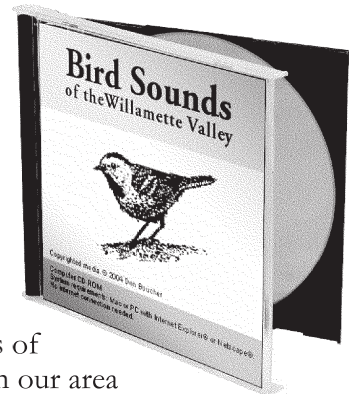
If you've seen snakes in a particular area, or expect that an

area is good snake habitat, you can increase your chances of seeing them by placing out a metal sheet. Use a scrap corrugated tin roof material or other thin metal sheet. Place it in an area that is exposed to morning sun and which seldom gets disturbed. The snakes, and possibly other burrowing or soil creatures, like the warmth and safety under the sheet. When you visit the spot next time, you can check it. Carefully but swiftly lift up the sheet to take a peek. If you want a photo, have your camera ready and focused before you lift the sheet. Gently replace the sheet as soon as possible. For this reason, you do not want to use a heavy sheet as it will squash the critters when you place it back down. Also, thin metal takes less time to warm up. Other materials, like plastic or wood, do not conduct heat very well. Snakes are not picky—any junky, rusty scrap will do. Periodically, clean off debris from the sheet so that it remains exposed to the sun.

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Sample sounds:

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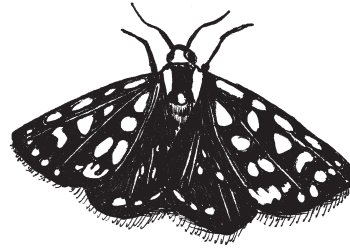
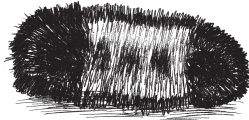
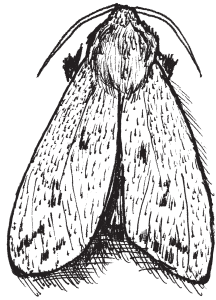
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Woolly Bears and Tiger Moths



Isabella Moth

Pyrrharctia isabella

This caterpillar is known as the Banded Woolly Bear. It emerges in the fall and eats various lawn plants but not regarded as a pest. It is black with an orange band in the center. The pattern cannot be used to predict the next winter but surprisingly, it is affected by the amount of rainfall in the previous winter.

The moth is a golden color and flies at night. The moth is also called the Isabella Tiger Moth.

Ranchman's Tiger Moth

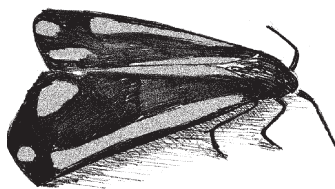
Platyrepia virginialis

The caterpillar of this "wooly bear" species emerges in spring. It is orange with a black band in the center (the opposite pattern of the Banded Woolly Bear). A distinctive feature is the longer white hairs that form a "mohawk" on the back side. Its host plants are willows.

The moth flies during the day and resembles a butterfly. The black forewings have pale yellow spots and the black hind wings have a few orange spots.

The Cinnabar Moth and Tansy Ragwort

The Cinnabar Moth has been introduced to help control Tansy Ragwort, an invasive plant that is poisonous to grazing livestock. It is a perennial introduced from Europe. The caterpillars of Cinnabar moths eat the plant. The plant is only dangerous if eaten. The moth's scientific name (*Tyria jacobaeae*) reflects its dependency on the plant (*Senecio jacobea*).



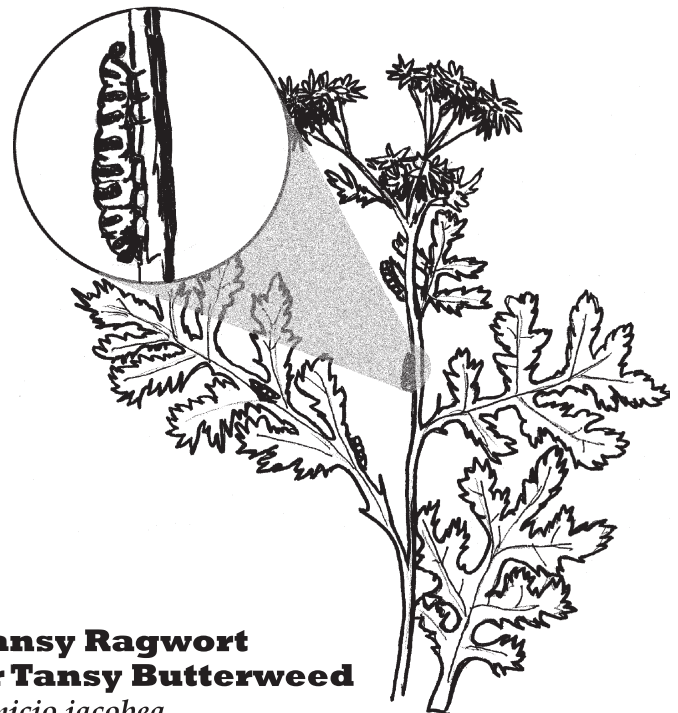
Cinnabar Moth

Tyria jacobaeae

A black moth with red markings. This daytime-flying moth also rivals butterflies in their color.

Where to find Cinnabar Moths

Find the plant and you will find the caterpillars as well as the moths. Tansy Ragwort grows in disturbed areas, like construction sites, edges of plowed fields and clearcuts. Look for the pretty clusters of yellow flowers. It is in the daisy family and the flower structure looks like little yellow daisies.



Tansy Ragwort or Tansy Butterweed

Senecio jacobea

The Cinnabar Moth lays eggs on Tansy Ragwort. The caterpillars are helpful in controlling the spread of this invasive, poisonous plant. The caterpillar is black and yellow, a warning to predators. The caterpillars contain toxic alkaloids ingested from their host plant.



neighborhood naturalist

Neighborhood Naturalist promotes interest about nature in back yards, parks and neighborhoods.

Submissions:

This is a newsletter which caters to nature enthusiasts. Any article, story, poem or artwork which celebrates nature in the Mid Willamette Valley is much welcome. The newsletter publishes 4 times a year around the Solstices and Equinoxes. Send your submissions two weeks in advance.

Contact info below:

Subscribe

4 issues per year, from \$3 to \$12 per year, sliding scale (based on income—honor system) or (HOUR notes)

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Events

July 12—Bat Picnic, Corvallis

Thursday. 8 PM - 10 PM, bring picnic food, drink, and place settings. Downtown Riverfront between Washington and Western. There is plenty of nearby parking by the skate park. Don Boucher (contact info to left)



July 14—Bat watch, Albany

Audubon Society of Corvallis

Meet at 8:00 P.M. at north end of LBCC Benton Center parking lot to carpool or 8:30 P.M. at west end of parking lot for Takena Point Restaurant (formerly Buzzsaw, 421 Water Ave, Albany). Marcia Cutler, 752-4313 or mccarmel@peak.org

September 19—Acorns as Food afternoon workshop

Learn how to process acorns into a nutritious and tasty meal. Look for details in autumn newsletter.

More events in the planning stages, visit Web site for updates or contact Don Boucher (contact info to left)

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