

The Valley Garter Snake

by Tim Spuckler

It was in early April of 2019 while on my annual trip to California that I decided to try out a new herping spot in Yolo County. It was in an area that is bordered on two sides with highways and on one side with agriculture. A brief hike turned up a Coast Fence Lizard and a Pacific Gopher Snake, two relatively common herps in the area. I found a cattail-lined ditch containing water and asked the farmers who were working the land if they minded me doing a bit of exploring. After getting their approval and hiking for a bit, I saw a snake dive into the cattails and despite my best efforts, it eluded being captured.

A little while later, while still walking along the ditch, I found my “lifer” Valley Garter Snake (*Thamnophis sirtalis fitchi*). And then another. Both were females and larger than any other species of Common Garter Snakes I’ve ever encountered in the wild.



My first encounter with wild Valley Garter Snakes was in Yolo County in a heavily disturbed area. Before finding any garters, I came across a Western Fence Lizard and a Pacific Gopher Snake.

The Valley Garter Snake is a dark-colored subspecies of *T. sirtalis*, often with only small amounts of red coloration. Its lateral and dorsal stripes are prominent yellow, giving the reptile a high contrast appearance. Adults measure 18 - 55 inches in length (46 - 140 cm), but the average size is under 36 inches (91 cm). This snake has less variation in color and pattern than most other subspecies of common garter snake.

T. s. fitchi is found throughout northern California, including the coast in Humboldt and Del Norte Counties, south, east of the north and south coast ranges through the Great Valley and much of the Sierra Nevada (excluding a large part of the interior part of the San Joaquin Valley alley) and east of the Sierra Nevada into the northern part of the Owens Valley. Outside of California, *T. s. fitchi* ranges east into western Nevada, Idaho, western Montana, western Wyoming, and north-central Utah. Some texts indicate that it is the only snake species to reside in the wild in Alaska (being found in the extreme southern part), though many sources say that Alaska has no native snakes.

The Valley Garter Snake is primarily active during daylight, frequently found near water and is a good swimmer. It often escapes into water when threatened. Like other members of the species *T. sirtalis*, it is capable of activity at lower temperatures than other species of North American snakes. In the wild it consumes a wide variety of prey, including amphibians and their larvae, fish, birds, small mammals, reptiles, earthworms, slugs, and leeches.



My first-ever encounters with wild Valley Garter Snakes.

Garter snakes are a popular choice for beginner snake enthusiasts due to their relatively small size, docile nature, and manageable care requirements. They are active during the day, making them enjoyable to observe.

The species *sirtalis* is widely kept and bred and *T. s. fitchi* husbandry is the same as *T. s. sirtalis*, *T. s. infernalis*, etc. The Valley Garter Snake is willing to eat a variety of food items and is adaptable to a wide range of housing options.

I tend to keep my garters in screen-covered glass aquariums with semi-naturalistic set-ups. I vary the tank size in accordance with the size of the snakes kept in them. For heat I generally use an overhead basking light on a timer combined with a heating pad left on all the time (except during winter cooling) placed underneath part of the cage. I keep my lights on a timer starting at 8 hours when the snakes come out of winter cooling and advancing to 16 hours by mid-June, before gradually going back to 8 hours of light by mid-November.

If kept at room temperature, a hot spot between 84 and 88 degrees Fahrenheit is ideal. I check cage temperatures using a reliable digital thermometer.



One of my garter snake enclosures - I like semi-natural set-ups with plenty of hiding spots.

A gravid Valley Garter Snake basking under an overhead light.

Snakes are well-known escape artists, so ensure that the enclosure has a tightly fitted lid. Their housing should also be free from hazards that might cause injury (like being crushed by a rock). Garter Snakes are

active snakes, so although they may seem small and of slender build, they utilize a fair amount of space to accommodate their lifestyle.

I mainly use aspen shavings as my terrarium substrate. When possible, I like to include live plants in my Garter Snake enclosures. By far the easiest terrarium plant to keep is Pothos (*Epipremnum aureum*). Pothos is a vine with heart-shaped green leaves featuring different color variations of white and yellow, depending on the variety. It is tolerant of a wide range of light and watering conditions, making it an ideal terrarium plant. Arrowhead (*Syngonium podophyllum*) is another attractive and durable plant that I like to use in my terrariums. Both types of plants can easily be grown either as cuttings in a jar of water, or in small pots.



Valley Garter Snakes do not vary much in appearance and feature bright yellow stripes and only minimal red markings.

I provide branches, bark or other features for climbing and a hide box in both the warmer and cooler sides of the enclosure. A large water bowl is available for drinking and soaking, though I ensure the cage remains dry to prevent skin problems.

My adult Valley Garter Snakes mainly eat chopped rodents mixed with chicken hearts. I occasionally add fish to the mix, but it seems a whole-food diet of rodents satisfies their nutritional needs. Newborns will usually eat live guppies and/or earthworms. I attempt to switch them over to rodents as soon as feasible. Baby garters grow fast and males can successfully breed at less than one year of age. Females can reach near-adult size in one year, but usually don't breed until their second year.



Baby Valley Garter Snakes are undeniably cute. The care and breeding of this subspecies is the same as for other T. sirtalis.

For snakes that I wish to breed, winter cooling goes from late November to mid-February. The snakes are kept in their enclosures with no heat and whatever natural light is present. Winter cooling temperatures vary, but average about 55 degrees F. I tend to keep my Garter Snakes in pairs or small groups year-round and breeding is often observed not only in early spring, but also in late summer after my females have given birth.

I've had litters of as large as 46 offspring from a single female, although my average is 20-something. The young are unproblematic to raise and kept in small groups. Garters have a "monkey see, monkey do" behavior and if one starts eating it "inspires" others to do the same, often triggering a feeding frenzy.

The Valley Garter Snake is one of the larger subspecies of *Thamnophis* native to the United States and its sharp colors and contrast offers the hobby something a little different. It was thrilling to come across this snake in the wild and enjoyable to keep and reproduce this subspecies.

Tim Spuckler has been breeding snakes for over 30 years and has many photos of the snakes he's worked with as well as his field outings on his webpage: www.thirdeyeherp.com

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