

JS Dragons

Care sheet for Eastern Black-Neck Garter Snakes

Eastern Black-Neck Garter Snakes are beautiful central Texas jewels that can easily be kept by those who enjoy garter snakes.



Origin & relatives

The eastern subspecies of black-neck garter snake (*Thamnophis cyrtopsis ocellatus*) is found only on the Edwards Plateau of central Texas and westward to the Trans-Pecos.

Description & color morphs

These snakes reportedly average 16-20 inches in length, but captives may often exceed this. Females get longer and stockier than males. The spots between the stripes on the eastern black-neck are large and encroach onto the stripes (especially on the sides) giving a wavy appearance. The dorsal stripe can be a brilliant orange. So far, no unusual color morphs have been produced (but could they improve on a snake this beautiful?).

Diet & feeding issues

Frogs are the primary diet in the wild. These snakes do not eat crickets or other insects, and I have not known them to take worms. Some will take fish.

Important: some fish contain thiaminase, an enzyme that breaks down vitamin B. A diet heavy in such fish may result in the snake having a serious illness or death. Fish to avoid include some minnows, goldfish, catfish, and others. Fish without thiaminase include sunfish, bass, trout, Atlantic cod, and others. These garter snakes can be induced to eat mice by scenting the thawed mouse with frog scent, and gradually reducing the amount of scenting. The snakes seem to do fine on a mouse diet. Feed juveniles on pinkie mice and adults on adult mice; in

each case the mouse should be no bigger around than the snake at its widest point. Babies are fed about every three days (depending on what is fed) and adults get a mouse weekly. Do not feed live mice, as they may injure the snake.

Life span

We can estimate life expectancy in captivity, but we cannot be sure. Where records have been kept, various species of garter snakes have lived 8 to 12 years or even longer.

Handling issues

Garter snakes are often more “wiggly” than some other species, and those that are unused to being handled may void musk (unpleasant-smelling stuff) or even feces when held. However, with regular handling, these snakes may be well-mannered even if active and alert. Let the snake move about in your hands with only gentle restraint to slow it down.

Eastern black-neck garters generally do not bite, but they might do so if you smell like their food or if you startle one that is not used to handling. The bite is harmless, though the small, sharp teeth might make a few pinprick wounds. It is true that garter snakes have Duvernoys glands above the upper jaws that secrete mild toxins. These substances may help subdue a frog, but they are not medically significant for humans. There’s no reason to worry about a bite.

As with other reptiles, good hygiene practices are necessary after handling and cage-cleaning. Reptiles can carry the *Salmonella* bacteria, which can give you an uncomfortable gastrointestinal illness and may pose a serious risk to young children and those with compromised immune systems. Wash your hands with soap and water after handling and cage-cleaning, and do not let young children handle the snake. Do not wash the cage or bowls around food preparation areas.

Cage requirements

Cages must be secure! A 20-gallon aquarium with a molded wire mesh lid will work, or a clear plastic storage box with small holes drilled for ventilation as long as the lid cannot be pushed up. We recommend shredded aspen bedding, although newspaper is OK. Never use cedar shavings!

These snakes should have a water bowl with clean water at all times. They do not have to be able to swim in it. There should also be a hide box, such as a plastic food storage box with a hole cut in the snap-on lid. You can put sphagnum moss or a paper towel in such a box and keep the moss or paper towel just slightly damp. Then create another hiding place (even as simple as a small cardboard box with the end cut out) as a “dry” hide box.

The temperature should be maintained around 80°F or a little higher (and it can drop some at night). Do not use “hot rocks” or exposed light bulbs that may burn your snake. Be careful not to put a terrarium by a window where it may overheat.

Garter snakes do not need special lighting (such as fluorescent UV bulbs) and the lighting of the room may be sufficient.

These snakes are not particularly social creatures and will not suffer if kept alone. In fact, if you keep several garter snakes in a relatively small cage, they might be a source of stress for each other.

Reproduction

As noted, males are smaller and more slender than females. Breeding takes place in the spring, and babies are born by live birth, late in the summer. Complete information about breeding is beyond the scope of this care sheet.

Avoiding illness & accidents

Prevention is the most important thing – follow the care instructions and your snake will likely stay healthy. Be careful to quarantine any new snakes and check them for mites. Snake mites are a little like ticks, only much smaller. If the water bowl has little black dots at the bottom (drowned mites) or if you see several little things like poppy seeds crawling on your snake, get treatment immediately! Snake mites are not native to North America, so the only way you will get them will be from other people’s collections.

Avoid accidents by handling the snakes carefully and supervising children who are handling them. Smaller garters are delicate and quick. They can get away easily – or if you restrain the snake by the tail, it may twist the tail off (they don’t grow back!).

If the snake becomes opaque (“blue”) in preparation for shedding, but then does not shed within a week of clearing up, the skin may be overly dry and the snake should be put in a damp bag or moist container overnight to help it shed.

Occasionally a snake will regurgitate a meal (if kept too cool, if disturbed soon after eating, or other reasons). This can irritate the esophagus and if fed again too quickly, the snake may again regurgitate. This can become a chronic condition. Wait a week after a regurgitation and then offer an unusually small prey item. If regurgitation happens with this second meal, take the snake to an experienced reptile veterinarian.

For more information...

Perlowin, David (2005) *Garter & water snakes*. BowTie Press (The Herpetocultural Library)

Rossi, John, & R. Rossi (2007) *What’s wrong with my snake?* BowTie Press (The Herpetocultural Library)

Rossman, Douglas, Neil Ford, & Richard Seigel (1996) *The Garter Snakes: Evolution & Ecology*. Univ. of OK Press

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