

# CHECKERED GARTER SNAKE

*Thamnophis marcianus marcianus*



## WHAT DO THEY LOOK LIKE?

This species of garter snake is relatively light colored, with a thin yellow stripe down the back and bold black spots in a checkered pattern over a grayish, light brown, or olive-colored background. The other two stripes along the sides of the snake are also thin and cream colored.

The head is often light olive or brown, with dark markings along the lip scales and in front of and behind the eye. Between those black markings, the scales may be nearly white, but in front of and behind those areas the color is similar to that on the top of the head. Just behind the head, a light crescent comes up toward the back of the head, and behind that is a dark patch before the spotted pattern begins.

Females grow larger than males, and one was reported to be nearly 43 inches though most are much shorter (two to three feet is more typical).

## HOW DO THEY DEFEND THEMSELVES? CAN THEY HURT YOU?

It is correct to call these snakes harmless. Wild checkered garter snakes sometimes will bite if picked up, but not always. The bites leave nothing more than scratches. There are a few reports in which a garter snake (not this species) bit a human and was allowed to chew, resulting in some swelling and bleeding. This is because they have modified salivary glands that secrete a mild toxin.

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The more likely result of picking up a wild checkered garter snake is that it may expel feces and musk on its captor. The musk gland secretions at the base of the tail have an odor that most consider offensive, and a frightened garter snake may use it to make an attacker leave it alone.

### WHERE ARE THEY FOUND?

In Texas, checkered garter snakes are mostly found west of a line from Fort Worth down to Victoria (there are a few records a little east of that line). They are found in dry grassland and savannah regions such as the Plains of west and south Texas, but within those regions they make use of ponds and creeks so that they are usually found close to water.

Outside of Texas, this snake is found from southern Kansas down through parts of Oklahoma, and westward in some areas of New Mexico, Arizona, and California. Its range extends south through parts of Mexico. Two related subspecies are found in southern Mexico into Central America.



### WHAT DO THEY EAT?

Checkered garter snakes eat frogs, toads, salamanders, tadpoles, earthworms, and occasionally they may eat fish, lizards or small mice. They may hunt during the day or night (largely depending on daytime high temperature).

### HOW DO THEY REPRODUCE?

They breed in the spring, generally in March and April. Females give birth to live young, and there is a report of this happening as early as May, but generally it is later in the summer. The seven or eight-inch babies look like small brightly-patterned versions of adults.

### WHAT CONSERVATION PROBLEMS DO THEY FACE?

NatureServe Explorer shows the checkered garter snake as “secure” in Texas. Many of the rural areas where it is found remain relatively wild and undeveloped, and in places it is a common snake.

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#### *Sources of information:*

NatureServe Explorer. *Thamnophis marcianus*. Checkered gartersnake.

[https://explorer.natureserve.org/Taxon/ELEMENT\\_GLOBAL.2.101075/Thamnophis\\_marcianus](https://explorer.natureserve.org/Taxon/ELEMENT_GLOBAL.2.101075/Thamnophis_marcianus) (accessed 6/1/24)

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