



Red-listed species

are those that have been legally designated, or are being considered for legal designation, as Endangered or Threatened.

Sharp-tailed Snake

Contia tenuis

At a Glance

The Sharp-tailed Snake is one of the smallest and most secretive snakes in B.C. Adults are a handsome chestnut brown colour, with darker sides and a dark mask over the eyes. The pupils are round, and a narrow neck slightly separates the head from the body. This ruler-sized snake measures up to 30 centimetres in length and is approximately the thickness of a pencil.

Sharp-tailed Snakes can be confused with young garter snakes. The Sharp-tailed Snake has a distinctive pattern of black and white banding on the belly that is sometimes present in garter snakes but is less obvious. Two features that are present only in the Sharp-tailed Snake are a divided anal plate (a scale above the anal slit on the underside of the snake), and a sharp, thorn-like tail tip. Like garter snakes, the Sharp-tailed Snake is non-venomous and completely harmless to humans.

Home Sweet Home

Sharp-tailed Snakes spend most of their time under cover, which partly explains why humans so rarely encounter them. In B.C., they are typically found on south-facing, rocky slopes and in small openings in Douglas-fir/Arbutus forests. These environments are normally moist in the spring, but dry in the summer. Areas where Sharp-tailed Snakes are found typically have abundant cover such as rocks, decaying logs or boards for snakes to hide under.

This is the Life

Very little is known about the reproductive biology of the Sharp-tailed Snake. Females lay between three and five eggs at a time, underground, in cracks between rocks or among grass roots. The eggs are

laid in late spring or early summer and hatch in the fall. Hatchlings are bright reddish brown and about the size of large earthworms (approximately 8 cm long). Female Sharp-tailed Snakes have been known to share communal egg-laying sites with other Sharp-tailed Snakes and with other reptiles!

What's on the Menu?

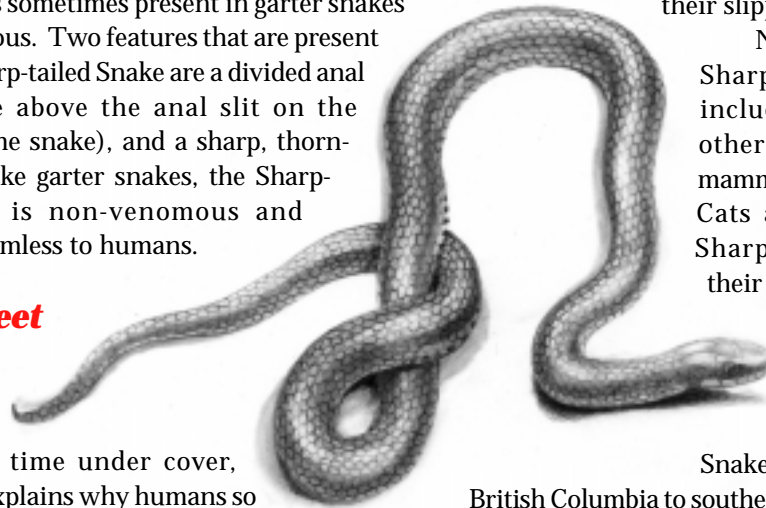
Although insects and earthworms may occasionally appear on the menu, small slugs are most likely the favourite food of the Sharp-tailed Snake. Long, recurved teeth may help these snakes grip and eat their slippery prey.

Natural predators of the Sharp-tailed Snake might include Steller's Jays and other diurnal birds, small mammals, and other snakes. Cats also may bring back Sharp-tailed Snakes from their nightly hunt.

Where and When

The Sharp-tailed Snake ranges from southern British Columbia to southern California. Although they are relatively common in suitable habitats in California and southern Oregon, they are only found in a few isolated locations in B.C. and Washington. In B.C., Sharp-tailed Snakes have only been found at seven locations on southern Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands. Although there is one record of the Sharp-tailed Snake from the interior of the province, the validity of this record is uncertain.

Unlike most other snake species in B.C., Sharp-tailed Snakes are most active during the cool, moist conditions of early spring and fall. They probably hibernate in the winter (mid-November to February), but have been found at the surface





BRITISH COLUMBIA'S Wildlife at Risk

NO KIDDING!

Sharp-tailed Snake hatchlings will curl up into a tight ball when handled, showing off a defensive strategy that likely makes them difficult to swallow!

*Unlike garter snakes, of which there are 11 species in North America and 3 species in B.C., Sharp-tailed Snakes have no close relatives. This unique snake is the "only child" of the genus *Contia*.*

When picked up, the Sharp-tailed Snake will thrash from side to side and press their tail-spine against their handler's skin - although this defensive strategy doesn't hurt a human, it can be a startling experience for a predator that might seize this snake!

during warm periods at this time of year. Sharp-tailed Snakes remain inactive under cover during hot, dry periods in the summer (July and August). Sharp-tailed Snakes may be mainly active at night, but there is little direct evidence to support this suggestion.

How They're Doing

Sharp-tailed Snakes have been found in only a few locations in B.C. in relatively small numbers. Their apparent scarcity, combined with the fact that these snakes live in some of the most densely populated areas of the province, means that the future of the Sharp-tailed Snake is insecure. This snake is a component of the unique ecosystem associated with the disappearing old growth forests of the Coastal Douglas-fir Biogeoclimatic Zone, of which only 0.5 percent remains. Most known and potential Sharp-tailed Snake sites are located on private lands, which are not subject to any habitat protection requirements. These snakes have been placed on the provincial Red List and have been listed as Endangered by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC).

How We're Helping

There is still much to learn about the biology of the Sharp-tailed Snake in B.C. Studies using artificial cover-objects on B.C.'s Gulf Islands have allowed biologists to locate and capture members of this elusive snake species with little disturbance to its natural habitat. This research, carried out in close collaboration with landowners, contributes to our understanding of the habitat needs, seasonal activity and population size of this species. A recovery team has been formed to initiate recovery of Sharp-tailed Snakes in B.C.

Sharp-tailed Snakes are protected under the British Columbia *Wildlife Act*.

How You Can Help

You can help out by reporting any sightings of this snake to the Conservation Data Centre in Victoria. These sightings help by providing information on the number and distribution of these snakes in the province.

Present breeding distribution of the Sharp-tailed Snake in British Columbia



Support conservation efforts that focus on the shrinking Coastal Douglas-fir Ecosystem that is home to these secretive snakes. Find out more about where Sharp-tailed Snakes can be found near your community and get involved when land-use planning decisions are being made that may affect these important habitats.

If you live in an area where Sharp-tailed Snakes are found, keep an eye out for them as you go about your day. Because humans share habitat with Sharp-tailed Snakes, this snake is often victim to cars and weed eaters. Learn more about the special habitat features, such as hibernation sites and summer cover, that this snake requires. Try and keep these features in mind as you make landscaping or development decisions in your own back yard – for the love of snakes!

You can find out more about the Wildlife Branch and Conservation Data Centre at:

<http://wlapwww.gov.bc.ca>

Conservation Data Centre

Ministry of Sustainable Resource Management
P.O. Box 9993 Stn Prov Gov
Victoria, B.C. V8W 9R7

Biodiversity Branch

Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection
P.O. Box 9374 Stn Prov Gov
Victoria, B.C. V8W 9M4



BRITISH COLUMBIA

Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection

Funding for this extension project was provided by Forest Renewal British Columbia