

SNAKE HIBERNACULA: SLITHERING INTO SPRING

By
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Spring is the time that snakes emerge from their winter hibernation dens or hibernacula. The common garter snake (*Thamnophis sirtalis*) is widely spread throughout North America. As it reaches its northern limits in northwestern British Columbia - the Nass and Skeena drainages - large numbers of these snakes will overwinter in common dens.



Suitable dens are often rare across the landscape. A northern hibernaculum must not only be deep enough to be below frost line in winter, its entrance must be in bedrock or large boulders or talus where predators can not dig up the snakes. Dens are also normally on open steep sunny slopes. The snow melts off faster here and the emerging snakes can bask in the spring sunlight. Where these conditions are unusual, a single hibernaculum can serve snakes from a wide area. Even dykes along streams and riprap for bridges can become hibernation dens for garter snakes where natural sites are not common.





When the garter snakes emerge, often while snow is still on the ground to the sides of the warm slope, they are lethargic and vulnerable to disturbance and predation. As the weather warms, the garter snakes will sometimes form mating balls when several males try to court one female snake at the same time. Once snow melts off in the surrounding forests, the snakes disperse into their summer habitats.

It is important that these common hibernation dens be protected. One den can serve snakes from long distances and loss of the hibernaculum can lead to destruction of a snake population for square kilometers around. It is also important that the emerging snakes not be disturbed or made vulnerable to increased predation by early spring predators such as ravens, foxes, and wolves.

The hibernaculum in the photos has a small, 10 cm wide entrance in bedrock. The bedrock knob is on a large river island, with no other suitable location for garter snake hibernation. It is vulnerable to fishermen and forest removal on the island.

If you know of a hibernaculum, please contact the local regional biologist at Ministry of Environment or Ministry of Forest, Lands & Natural Resource Operations Inquiry BC (1 800 663 7867 or <http://www.gov.bc.ca/contacts/index.html>)

Or contact



<http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/wld/frogwatch/ca>

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