

## Coast Garter Snakes in the Wild and in Captivity

by Tim Spuckler

In April of 2010 I was visiting California and as I was driving north on the Pacific Coast Highway, I found a herping spot that looked like it was worth investigating. With the ocean less than a hundred yards away, I walked along a freshwater inlet and found my first Coast Garter Snake. Since then, I have found hundreds of these snakes on my visits to the Golden State.



*Coast Garter Snake habitat*



*My first-ever Coast Garter Snake*



*A redder-than-usual Coast Garter*

This Coast Garter Snake is highly variable in appearance, with the colors between its yellow stripes brown or olive, with a pattern of dark spots, intermixed with a suffusion of red, orange or rust coloring.



*A typical looking Coast Garter Snake*



*A mostly brown Coast Garter Snake*



*A heavily spotted individual*

I find their variability interesting. One form looks like a “flame” Eastern Garter Snake, while others that I have found look erythristic. I’ve even found a few examples expressing none of the trademark red coloration that this species is known for.



*Some of the Coast Garter Snakes that I have found, showing their variability in color and pattern*

Adult female *Thamnophis elegans terrestris* can reach over 100 cm total length, though the males are much smaller and thinner (60 – 80 cm total length). Females have large heads and are relatively stout in stature. The belly is often pale with a few red spots, though in some cases the red spots may be so dominant that it turns the belly almost all red.



Examples of wild “high red” (or orange) Coast Garter Snakes that I have found in the wild

This snake occurs in a narrow coastal strip from the southern part of California up until southern Oregon; hence the common name “Coast Garter Snake.” I have found it in a wide range of habitats - from the edges of forests, to the tops of the Santa Cruz Mountains, to close proximity to the Pacific Ocean. The Coast Garter Snake is frequently found along waterways, such as at the edges of ponds and creeks. It is common for me to observe this snake in the same habitat as *T. sirtalis* and *T. atratus*. I have observed all three species in the same area of Marin County (California).



A wild Coast Garter in Marin County



A wild Coast Garter in the Santa Cruz Mountains

Reflecting the diversity of habitats frequented by these reptiles, a wide variety of food items are eaten, including fish, amphibians, leeches, slugs, earthworms, lizards, snakes, small mammals and birds.

The Coast Garter Snake takes advantage of the seasonal availability of food items, consuming more slugs and earthworms in early spring, before switching to tadpoles caught in drying temporary pools in late spring. In summer their diet largely switches to small rodents.

It can be regarded as even more of a habitat generalist than *T. sirtalis*, as in some areas its dietary preference tends to favor upland prey, such as rodents and lizards. In certain habitats it is by far the most commonly encountered species of snake.

When threatened, it may retreat into heavy vegetation, into piles of rocks and even into the water. Like other garter snakes, it readily musks and occasionally bites upon being captured.



*Orange-striped Coasts exploring their enclosure*



*A pair of Coast Garter Snakes breeding in captivity*

As captives I have found Coast Garters to be hardy and easy to reproduce. They tend to have small litters of large babies, with about a dozen as their average litter size. My record for largest litter is 16, which happened on my birthday in 2022.



*A litter of "standard" Coast Garter Snakes*



*A litter of orange-striped Coast Garter Snakes*

I keep my garters in glass terrariums with aspen bedding, hiding spots, live plants, a water dish and an overhead light on a timer as well as a heating pad which is always on, except during winter cooling. I cool them from late November through mid-February. This species often goes off feed during the winter.



*This species often basks under an overhead light*

Babies are born brown and take a few months to begin developing red color. They are easy to get started on feeding on standard garter snake fare: fish, earthworms and chopped pinky mice.



*What the author's Garter Snake setups look like*



*Like most snakes, Coast Garters make use of hideboxes*

Coasts tend to be a tamer type of Garter Snake and tolerate handling well. They are remarkably hardy, usually great feeders and come in a range of colors and patterns. This has been an enjoyable species to encounter in the wild as well as a rewarding reptile to keep and breed in captivity.

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](http://www.thirdeyeherp.com)