

# The Seven Snakes of the Okanagan and Similkameen

Whether you are hiking in the hills, working outside, or playing in the dry Southern Interior of BC, snake encounters can be common from April through October, when snakes are active.

Only one of the seven snake species found in the Southern Interior is venomous and it is important to be able to distinguish between different kinds of snakes and to react appropriately.

The *Northern Pacific Rattlesnake* occurs in the Okanagan, Kettle, Nicola, Thompson and Fraser River watersheds. They are most common on dry hillsides, rarely occurring higher than 1000m above sea level. Individual Northern Pacific Rattlesnakes are variable in colouration and pattern, but all belong to the same species. There are no other species in the province. They den in hibernacula, usually with other species of snakes. Because they are loyal to their specific dens, these sites are critically important to their survival.

Broad, triangular head with an obvious 'neck'

Brown-green to green-grey, sometimes slightly reddish

Darker circles down the back with light 'halos' around them

Tail ends in a rattle or small button



The *Great Basin Gophersnake* is similar in appearance to a rattlesnake and the two snakes are often confused. When approached, the Gophersnake may make a clicking and hissing noise, imitating that of a rattlesnake as well. The Gophersnake's distribution is also very similar to that of the Northern Pacific Rattlesnake. While the snake is sometimes called a "Bull Snake", that is actually the name of its eastern cousin. This is the largest snake species to occur in the Southern Interior, sometimes exceeding 2 metres in length.



Narrow head with dark band across the eyes and no 'neck'

Tan body with dark, semi-connected rectangles along it

Tail ends in a point with no indication of a rattle



The *Terrestrial Garter Snake* occurs throughout the interior of the province, often near water where frogs and fish are numerous. They are variable in colour and pattern, but the yellow stripe always has irregular margins. Neither species of garter snake is venomous, but they may bite when handled.



The *Common Garter Snake* occurs throughout the interior of the province, often near water where frogs and fish are numerous. They have a distinct, smooth-edged, yellow stripe down the middle of their back. When handled, they often secrete a musk-smelling substance that is meant to deter predators. This odour may remain on your hands, even after washing.



The *Desert Night Snake* was not known to occur in the province until the early 1980s. Since then, less than 50 have been found, all in the semi-arid habitats of the south Okanagan and lower Similkameen. They have a distinct blotch or "saddle" marking on the back of their neck. Their eyes are copper coloured with elliptical pupils. These snakes are very small, rarely exceeding half a metre.



The *Yellow-bellied Racer* gets its name from its amazing speed, which is used to escape predators and to travel through grassland and rocky habitats in search for food. Racers are very slender and can reach lengths over one metre. Racers can only capture prey they can overcome by mouth alone and are one of the few snakes in the world that eat insects. These snakes are high-strung and may bite when handled, but are not venomous.

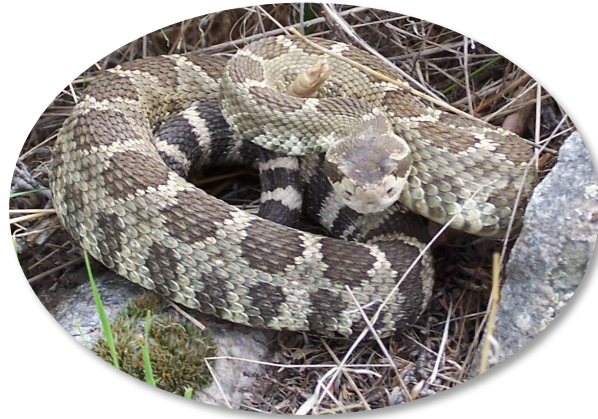


The *Rubber Boa* occurs across the southern portion of the province, usually in forested habitats. It is rarely seen as it is nocturnal and spends much of its time under coarse woody debris. They skin texture appears rubbery and these snakes use their tails as a diversion while under attack. Unlike larger boas in the tropics, Rubber Boas rarely exceed 70cm; however, like its large cousins, Rubber Boas use constriction to kill their prey.



## Avoid surprises with snakes!

- Wear protective footwear, such as rubber or high leather boots and pants when working in tall grass or cluttered areas.
- Move slowly and be observant if you are in an area where rattlesnakes are likely to be present (rocky talus, open grasslands and wetlands).
- Step around, not over debris, as a snake could be on the other side.
- Never put hands someplace where you cannot see if a snake is present.
- Never harass a snake; they may bite if threatened.
- If you encounter a rattlesnake, leave it alone.



## Stop! Hey! What's that sound?

When you hear the buzzing of a rattlesnake, stop and determine where it is located. Slowly retreat from the snake. Remember, the rattle is a sign that the snake is aware of you and wishes to avoid confrontation. **Do not attempt to move the snake unless it is absolutely necessary.** Even though they can sense heat, if you remain motionless, you will not appear threatening. If you suddenly find yourself in strike range (length of the snake), remain motionless and have someone else use a stick to distract the snake away from you.

## If you are bitten...

It is very unlikely that you will be bitten by a rattlesnake unless you have harassed or injured it. Biting is its last resort in self defence. The production of venom consumes large amounts of energy for the snake. It is not uncommon for rattlesnake bites to be "dry" (no venom injected). However, if bitten, always seek medical attention as soon as possible, even if no symptoms occur.

- ☑ Call the hospital immediately to allow them time to prepare.
- ☑ Do not apply a tourniquet.
- ☑ Do not cut the wound.
- ☑ Do not attempt to suck out the venom with your mouth.
- ☑ Try to remain calm. Rattlesnake venom evolved to kill and digest small mammals like mice and voles— nothing as large as a human. Therefore, although quite painful, rattlesnake bites are rarely fatal.
- ☑ Do not attempt to kill the snake.

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# Living in Nature Series

## Snake Smart

People have indiscriminately killed snakes out of fear or for safety concerns. Snakes are an important part of the environment and have been for millions of years. They are significant predators, keeping populations of mice, voles and pocket gophers in check. Snakes themselves are important prey for other predators, such as birds of prey, badgers and bears. If their populations continue to be threatened, they could face extinction.

All snakes have suffered substantial declines in their populations over the past century. Urbanization, intensive agriculture, rock blasting, roadway mortalities and direct persecution have all caused snake numbers to dwindle.

- ☑ Brake for snakes! Be careful to avoid driving over snakes when they are crossing roads.
- ☑ Avoid disturbing rock and woody debris in potential snake habitat
- ☑ Encourage others to use harmless and effective ways to cope with snake encounters, such as snake barrier fencing around yards
- ☑ Control domestic pets (cats and dogs) that will harm snakes.
- ☑ Do not disturb dens if you find them.
- ☑ Do not move snakes around! Snakes are very loyal to their den sites.
- ☑ Never harass a snake. Leave snakes you encounter alone.

All of BC's snakes  
are protected by  
law under the BC  
Wildlife Act. It is a  
Federal offense to  
harass or harm a  
snake

