

Garter Snakes by Rebecca Lexa

If you see a snake around Willapa Bay, it's almost certainly going to be a garter snake. The two species you're likely to find are the common garter snake, which prefers wetlands and other soggy spots, and the northwestern garter snake, found in drier areas of forests and meadows. The common garter snake is also often larger than its northwestern cousin, and has patches of red on its sides which the other species lacks.

Garter snakes are nonvenomous, in that they cannot inject venom into prey, though their saliva does have mild toxins that may be irritating if you get bitten. However, these gentle snakes would much prefer to be left alone, and should be considered completely harmless. They are highly valuable additions to their ecosystems, and feed on small animals like earthworms and minnows. They also provide food to herons, foxes and other larger predators, though any animal wishing to eat a garter snake must contend with its smelly musk glands!

Common garter snakes have a secret super power: they are immune to the toxins found in rough-skinned newts! If a human being were to eat a newt they could die, yet these small snakes usually only experience a bit of sluggishness as their bodies process the chemical. They also have the ability to gauge how much of the toxin the newt they've caught has, and will spit out one that is too toxic.

So the next time you see a garter snake out on the trail or sunning itself on a log, give it some respect!