

# Common Gartersnakes and the Department of Defense

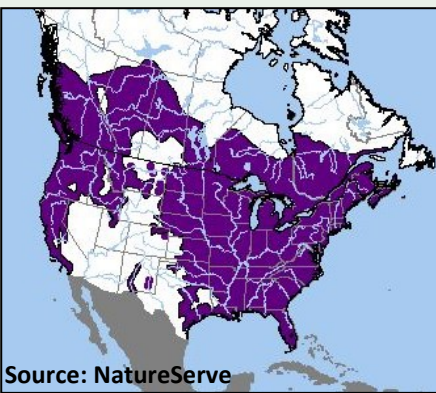


Picture by Paul Block

The Common Gartersnake (*Thamnophis sirtalis*) is the most widely distributed snake in North America and one of the most common snake species confirmed present on military properties. There are currently 12 recognized subspecies of Common Gartersnakes.

**Description:** A small striped snake measuring an average of 18-26 inches (45.7-66 cm) in length and exhibiting highly variable color patterns. It typically has two to three yellow, brownish, or greenish stripes running horizontally along the top and sides of the body and tail. Variable black spots between the stripes are often present. The head is wider than the neck, and its tongue is red with a black tip.

**Range:** Southeast Alaska east to Quebec and the Maritime Provinces of Canada, and south to southern California, Texas and southern



Source: NatureServe

Florida. Absent over large portions of the interior of the western United States, although isolated populations occur in central New Mexico, western Texas, and northern Mexico.

**Habitat:** The Common Gartersnake inhabits a wide variety of wetland and terrestrial habitats, as well as urban environments. Typical habitats include meadows, marshes, deciduous and pine woodlands, streams, drainage ditches, city parks, and residential areas.

**Behavior:** The breeding period begins as early as the first few warm days following emergence from hibernation in early spring. Breeding may also occur in the fall before hibernation. Three to 85 young (typically 14 to 40)

are born from July to September. Sexual maturity is reached in about two years. Their primary food source is earthworms; however, they also eat amphibians, fishes, and insects. This species is primarily diurnal, but is sometimes active at night during warmer weather. When captured, gartersnakes may emit a strong and foul smelling anal musk in an attempt to escape predation.

**Military Interactions:** Ubiquitous across many habitat types, this snake can be found in just about any environment and is encountered frequently. Although harmless, this species is nevertheless often persecuted by unknowing personnel. Education of military installation personnel on proper identification is important to prevent unwarranted persecution.

**Conservation Status:** The Common Gartersnake has no federal or state conservation status, has a NatureServe Raking of G5-Secure, and is listed as Least Concern by the IUCN Red list. One subspecies of the Common Gartersnake, the San Francisco Gartersnake (*T. sirtalis tetrataenia*), is federally-listed as endangered and is also state-endangered in California.

**Threats/Planning Considerations:** Although widespread and secure across its range, pesticide use, human development, persecution, and destruction of habitats are threats to this species and can cause local or even regional population declines. The San Francisco Gartersnake in particular is further threatened by illegal collection for the pet trade. Protection of habitat and education of installation personnel can assist with maintaining populations of this species.

## Occurrence on Military Lands

Confirmed	Potential
Confirmed present on 164 military properties (32 Air Force; 89 Army; 8 Marine Corps; 35 Navy)	Up to an additional 132 military properties (32 Air Force; 45 Army; 6 Marine Corps; 49 Navy)

