

# SNAKES OF CONNECTICUT



**Eastern Gartersnake**  
*Thamnophis sirtalis*

The Common Gartersnake is perhaps the most common, widely distributed, and familiar of all North American snakes. In Connecticut, the Gartersnake is found throughout the state. Adults typically range in size between 18 and 26 inches in length, but can measure up to 42 inches long. Gartersnakes are also viviparous – they do not lay eggs, instead giving birth to live young, which disperse immediately upon birth. The Gartersnake derives its name from the resemblance of their stripes to old-fashioned sock garters. Gartersnakes feed on a variety of small animals. Amphibians (frogs, toads, salamanders) are the main prey, followed by earthworms, mice, small fish, nestling birds, small snakes, leeches, slugs, snails, sowbugs, crayfish, millipedes, insects, and spiders. Gartersnakes are harmless to people and are NOT venomous. They do not constitute a nuisance or impact humans or human activity. However, they are often encountered in yards and around outbuildings. Like most other snake species, the Gartersnake is shy and non-aggressive.



**Common Ribbonsnake**  
*Thamnophis sauritus*  
*State Species of Special Concern*

The slimmest and thinnest member of the Thamnophis genus (gartersnake group), the Common Ribbonsnake is less common than its relative, the Eastern Gartersnake. It is a Species of Special Concern in Connecticut due to declining numbers and the loss and degradation of its wetland habitats. The small (typically 20-32 inches), slender, and striped Ribbonsnake is most commonly confused with its relative, the Eastern Gartersnake. The Ribbonsnake seldom ventures from shallow aquatic habitats, and favors open, grassy, or shrubby areas bordering ponds, streams, and wooded swamps. They feed on a variety of aquatic creatures, mainly amphibians such as frogs, toads, salamanders, and tadpoles. They also consume small fish and some invertebrates. Females give birth to live young. Ribbonsnakes, like their relatives the Gartersnakes, are more tolerant of cooler temperatures than other snake species. Both are Connecticut's earliest emerging snakes in spring. The Common Ribbonsnake is non-venomous and harmless to humans. It is an important predator in aquatic food webs. Do NOT attempt to kill any Ribbonsnakes under any circumstances as this is an illegal action.



**Eastern Hog-nosed Snake**  
*Heterodon platyrhinos*  
*State Species of Special Concern*

The Eastern Hog-nosed snake is one of the most unique snakes found in Connecticut. It also is one of the rarer snakes in our state due to population declines caused by human disturbance and habitat loss. This short, stout snake usually measures about 21 to 32 inches in length. The Hog-nosed snake's most distinctive field mark is an upturned, hog-like snout, which is used for digging up this snake's main food item, toads. It is the only snake in the United States with this characteristic. This completely harmless, non-venomous snake can put on an act that often frightens or alarms those who encounter it. When feeling threatened, the Hog-nosed snake will coil, flattening its head and neck to form a cobra-like hood, inflating its body, hissing fiercely, and striking violently. These behaviors have earned the Hog-nosed other names, such as puff adder, blow snake, and hissing viper. If these tactics do not scare away a predator, the snake will writhe about, excrete a foul-smelling musk, and then turn over with its mouth open, tongue hanging out, and lie still, feigning death. These unique behaviors often have people convinced that the hog-nosed snake is venomous, which sometimes results in the snake's death due to misidentification and misunderstanding.



**Eastern Milksnake**  
*Lampropeltis t. triangulum*

The Eastern Milksnake is one of the more common snakes found in Connecticut. Its frequent occurrence in rodent-infested barns led to the erroneous belief that they suck milk from cows by night; hence the name milksnake. The body is gray to tan, while the belly exhibits a black-and-white checkerboard pattern. Adults measure from 19 to 52 inches long. This harmless snake is often mistaken for the venomous Northern Copperhead and killed. Eastern Milksnakes and Northern Copperheads can be distinguished by a few basic characteristics. The head of a Copperhead is copper-colored and never marked, while the milksnake's head has the light "V" or "Y-shaped" mark. The Copperhead has a wide triangle-shaped head joined to a narrow neck; the Milksnake's head is narrow. The Copperhead has only one row of crossbands down its heavy body in contrast to the Milksnake's 3 to 5 rows of blotches down a slender body. The Milksnake has smooth scales while the Copperhead has keeled scales. Milksnakes feed mainly on mice, but will also take other small mammals, other snakes, birds and their eggs, and slugs. They are secretive and often go unnoticed as they spend most of their time hidden under logs, boards, rocks, or other debris. They seldom bask in the open and are active mainly at night.



**Eastern Ratsnake**  
*Pantherophis alleghaniensis*

The Eastern Ratsnake is the largest snake found in Connecticut. It is irregularly distributed within the state, but is locally common. It thrives in areas that contain a mixture of houses, agriculture, and woodland. This large, black, heavy-bodied snake can measure between 46 and 86 inches long. Flecks of white are often present on the black body, and the snake has a white chin and a belly with a black checkerboard pattern. Active hunters, Eastern Ratsnakes prey on rodents and other small mammals, small birds, reptiles, amphibians, insects, and sometimes bird eggs. The Ratsnake's square-shaped body enables it to climb high in trees, attics, haylofts, and other structures. They play an essential role in controlling destructive rodent populations. Eastern Ratsnakes are popular with the pet trade, therefore populations are often vulnerable to illegal collection. This or any other wild snake should NEVER be collected from the wild to be kept as a pet. The removal of even one individual can negatively affect the population. Snakes are long-lived animals that require specialized care.



**Eastern Wormsnake**  
*Carphophis a. amoenus*

The Eastern Wormsnake is so named because it resembles an earthworm. This small, burrowing snake is a southern species, just entering southern New England and adjacent sections of New York. This small, slender snake has a worm-like appearance. It has a chocolate brown-gray body with pink belly; small flattened head with tiny eyes; stubby tail with pointed tip; and smooth, polished scales. Individuals range from 7-14 inches in length. Their primary food item is earthworms, but the wormsnake will also feed on soft-bodied insects. These snakes may be active during both the day and night, and they are rarely encountered in the open, as they are usually under flat slabs of rock, logs, bark, boards, and other debris. They will spend the winter underground. No snake has an actual stinger, but the Wormsnake has a sharp, pointy tail that aids in burrowing. When handled, the snake will use its spiny tail as if burrowing and push against the fingers instead of biting. It also can emit an unpleasant odor from anal glands if stressed.

**Northern Black Racer**  
*Coluber c. constrictor*



The Northern Black Racer is one of two large, black snakes found in Connecticut (the other is the Eastern Ratsnake). It is considered an "important species" in the state as its population is declining due to loss of habitat through succession, fragmentation, and development. This fairly large snake can measure in length from 33 to 72 inches. It has a solid black, cylindrical body with a bluish belly and white chin. An active daytime hunter, the Black Racer will search for prey over an extensive home range. Its prey consists of smaller individuals of other snake species, toads, frogs, small birds, chipmunks, mice, shrews, other small rodents, and invertebrates such as butterfly and moth larvae, various other insects, and spiders. Although the Black Racer is swift, its top speed is about 10 miles per hour, the same as a quick jog. Racers are beneficial to humans by controlling rodents, especially when they occur in or near agricultural fields.

**Northern Brownsnake**  
*Storeria d. dekayi*



The Northern Brownsnake is found throughout Connecticut, and its population is currently considered secure in the state. This small snake usually reaches an adult length of 9 to 15 inches. Northern Brownsnakes are found in a variety of habitats, such as wetlands, grasslands, and forests, but they are most commonly encountered in disturbed or residential areas. This snake feeds during all hours of the day on insects, earthworms, slugs, snails, fish, and sometimes small amphibians. Northern Brownsnakes are somewhat tolerant of colder temperatures. They spend the winter in dens, such as rodent burrows, rock crevices, or under buildings, that are below the frost line. These winter dens are often communally shared with other Brownsnakes and also with other snake species, like Eastern Gartersnakes, Northern Redbelly Snakes, and Smooth Greensnakes.



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**Northern Watersnake**  
*Natrix s. sipedon*

The Northern Watersnake is a common resident of nearly all of Connecticut’s freshwater wetlands and waterways. This snake can reach an adult length of 24 to 48 inches. Northern Watersnakes are often mistaken for the venomous Water Moccasin and killed. Although these two species may be similar in appearance, Water Moccasins do not occur in Connecticut. They are also confused with another Connecticut snake, the venomous Northern Copperhead. Copperheads, however, are rarely found in water. Northern Watersnakes will inhabit any freshwater wetland with suitable cover and food, such as lakes, ponds, streams, rivers, reservoirs, swamps, and marshes. They feed primarily on fish, but also frogs, toads, salamanders, insects, crayfish, and rarely mice and shrews. The Northern Watersnake is well adapted for an aquatic existence. Excellent swimmers, Watersnakes patrol the water with only their head above the surface, though they can easily submerge to seek out prey by probing the bottom with their snout. Prey is located by a combination of sight and smell; the snakes detect motion with their vision and also have an acute sense of smell.



**Northern Redbelly Snake**  
*Storeria o. occipitomaculata*

The secretive Northern Redbelly Snake, which is not often observed, is widely distributed in upland regions of Connecticut. The Redbelly Snake is small, measuring between 8-11 inches in length. Redbelly Snakes are typically found in moist upland habitats, including woodlands, wet meadows, swamp forests, open fields, and marsh or bog borders. Favored food items include insects, slugs, earthworms, and beetle larvae. The Northern Redbelly snake is sometimes confused with the Northern Brownsnake, Northern Ring-necked Snake, and Eastern Wormsnake. All are nonvenomous species. When Redbelly Snakes are handled, they will not try to bite, but they may emit musk from glands at the base of the tail and some may curl the upper “lip” outward, showing off tiny teeth.



**Northern Ring-necked Snake**  
*Diadophis punctatus edwardsii*

The small, secretive, and beautifully marked Northern Ring-necked Snake is found in a wide variety of habitats in Connecticut, from near sea level to the state’s highest elevations in the northwest corner. Ring-necked Snakes are small and thin, measuring from 9 to 20 inches in length. This snake is most frequently encountered under the cover of rocks, logs, bark, leaf litter, boards, and other debris. Typical food items of the Ring-necked Snake include small salamanders (like the Redback), Redbelly Snakes, and earthworms. This basically nocturnal snake spends most of the day concealed under cover. When disturbed from its hiding place, it will usually seek cover under the nearest available object.



**Smooth Greensnake**  
*Opheodrys vernalis*

*State Species of Special Concern*

The thin and small Smooth Greensnake is irregularly distributed in Connecticut. It is easily distinguished from the other native snakes by its striking solid green coloration. This State Species of Special Concern is facing the loss of its specialized habitat from the Connecticut landscape due to development and forest succession. In Connecticut, Smooth Greensnakes are found mostly in the eastern half of the state where suitable habitat exists. They are rare in southwestern Connecticut and only occasionally found in the northwestern portion of the state. Small and delicate, this snake ranges from 12 to 25 inches in length. Smooth Greensnakes are insectivores; they feed on a variety of insects and spiders. Smooth Greensnakes are nonvenomous and completely harmless to humans. They are docile and will usually flee if threatened. These snakes have ecological importance by controlling insect populations and, in turn, providing a food source for other animals, such as hawks, great blue herons, raccoons, and foxes. They can be observed basking on rocks, logs, or other such basking sites. Shortly after death, this snake loses its green coloration and turns bright blue.

## VENOMOUS SNAKES OF CONNECTICUT



**Northern Copperhead**  
*Agkistrodon contortrix mokasen*



The Northern Copperhead is one of two venomous snake species found in Connecticut; the other is the state-endangered Timber Rattlesnake. Connecticut’s Copperhead population is more stable than the Timber Rattlesnake’s, but it still has been declining due to habitat loss, disturbance, and human persecution. Countless Copperheads and other snakes are killed as they cross roads during the breeding season or while travelling to and from den sites. Intentional killing due to fear and misunderstanding also reduces population densities and abundance. A triangular, or spade-shaped head, which is wider than the neck, is a distinctive characteristic of many venomous snakes. Another distinctive characteristic is a “pit” on each side of the head between the eyes and nostril. Copperheads generally measure about 24-37 inches in length. They consume mainly mice and small rodents, but will also eat other reptiles, amphibians, small birds, and insects. Copperheads and rattlesnakes are pit vipers. They have a cavity on each side of the head located between the nostril and the eye that contains a pit organ. The pit organs enable the snakes to seek out and strike accurately at objects warmer than their surroundings; this adaptation helps pit vipers prey on nocturnal mammals. Pit vipers also have large, hollow fangs at the front of their mouths that are connected to the bones of the upper jaw and palate so that they are folded against the roof of the mouth when the mouth is closed and are automatically brought forward when the mouth is opened. These fangs inject venom into prey. Copperhead venom is hemolytic, meaning it causes the breakdown of red blood cells in the bitten animal and this eventually subdues the animal, allowing the snake to easily swallow it. The Eastern Milksnake, Northern Watersnake, and Eastern Hog-nosed Snake are often confused with the copperhead and needlessly killed. All of these snake species should never be killed; they should be observed from a distance and left alone.

**Timber Rattlesnake**  
*Crotalus horridus*

*State Endangered Species*



The Timber Rattlesnake is one of only two venomous species found in Connecticut; the other is the Northern Copperhead. This snake is extremely rare in the state and is listed as an Endangered Species. Once documented in over 20 towns in Connecticut, this snake is now limited to isolated populations in about 10 towns in the central and western portions of the state. Timber Rattlesnake populations have declined, mainly because of human activity and persecution, which includes the illegal pet trade, intentional killing, habitat degradation and fragmentation, and human development. This heavy-bodied snake can grow to lengths between 36 and 72 inches. The Timber Rattlesnake feeds primarily on mice, other small mammals (voles, shrews, chipmunks, squirrels), and occasionally birds. The primary purpose of venom is for eating and digestion. Therefore, a defensive strike has less – and sometimes no- venom compared to a prey strike. From birth, rattlesnakes have a small rattle at the end of their tail. This rattle is keratinous (like our fingernails) and a small segment is added each time the snake sheds its skin. When these “segments” are vibrated together, a rattle-like sound is created. If you encounter a Timber Rattlesnake, observe it from a distance, calmly and slowly back away from it, and allow the snake to go on its way. Quick movements often scare snakes and may provoke a defensive strike. You should not try to agitate the snake by getting too close or handling it. Rattlesnakes will usually let you know if you are getting too close. All snakes will retreat from humans if given a chance.

Do NOT attempt to kill any rattlesnakes under any circumstances as this is an illegal action and dangerous!