

BUTLER'S GARTERSNAKE

Distribution

In Canada, Butler's Gartersnake (*Thamnophis butleri*) is restricted to Ontario where it has recently been found in two regions: Windsor-Sarnia (Essex, Chatham-Kent, Lambton Counties and Walpole Island) and Luther Marsh (Dufferin and Wellington Counties).



Conservation Status

Butler's Gartersnake is listed as Endangered in Ontario under the provincial Endangered Species Act, 2007 (ESA 2007). Endangered Species and their general habitat are automatically protected under the ESA.



Habitat and Ecology

Historically, the Butler's Gartersnake occurred in moist tallgrass prairie habitats but can now be found in old fields, wetland edges and other grassy areas. This species has also been found in urban and agricultural areas.



The species primarily feeds on earthworms and leeches, but also eat insects and frogs.



Burrows made by small mammals and/or chimney stack crayfish are often used as hibernation sites, called hibernacula. This species is also commonly found in rock piles and old stonewalls.

Identification

Butler's Gartersnake is a small, 25 to 50 cm long, gentle, non-venomous snake.



It has a brown-black body with three yellow stripes: one down the back and one on each side, on the third and part of the second and fourth scale rows. The chin and belly are yellowish in colour.

Its close resemblance to the Eastern Gartersnake, found within its range, often leads to confusion in identification. However, Butler's Gartersnake is shorter in total length, more docile and has a unique pattern and position of side stripes in comparison to the Eastern Gartersnake.



While fast moving in grassy environments, Butler's Gartersnake display a distinctive movement when navigating through non-vegetated areas, known as side-winding.

Reproduction

Butler's Gartersnake breed in the spring, soon after emerging from hibernation.



Butler's Gartersnake is ovoviviparous, meaning it gives birth to live offspring! Instead of depositing eggs in nesting material, the eggs undergo incubation within the female.

In mid-to late summer, females give birth to 10 - 12 young snakes, each approximately 15 cm in length.



RECOVERY ACTIONS

- Woody vegetation management including prescribed burns, were undertaken in Tallgrass Prairie Heritage Park and Black Oak Heritage Park of the Ojibway Prairie Complex.
- Ground searches were conducted across 15 hectares of restored habitat to better understand the population status of Butler's Gartersnake in the area.
- Boot cleaning brushes and accompanying signage have been installed at the main trailhead of Black Oak Heritage Park and Tallgrass Prairie Heritage Park to help mitigate threats to Butler's Gartersnake and its habitat.

THREATS

- The primary threat contributing to Butler's Gartersnake decline is loss of tallgrass prairie and grassland habitats due to urban development and agricultural expansion.
- Additionally, any remaining habitat is often fragmented which poses a challenge, as this relatively sedentary snake is not prone to moving through unsuitable habitats.
- Another significant threat to Butler's Gartersnake is road mortality.

Our lives could not be if not for the lives of the plants and animals. As our food, medicine, clothing, shelter, tools, and inspiration, they give themselves. *"In their giving, their lives are also ensured in a chain of reciprocity"* (Kimmerer, 2013). We have responsibilities to the plants and animals. To learn their names, notice them, spread their seeds, create habitat, and give them offerings. It is in these relationships we restore the environment and ourselves.

~ Mariah Alexander

WHAT WE CAN DO TO HELP

1. Enhance understanding of the species' biology, distribution, threats, and potential recovery through research and monitoring of species at risk and their habitats.
2. If you find a Butler's Gartersnake, exercise caution and refrain from capturing, handling, or harming it; instead, demonstrate respect and observe from a safe distance. Report your sighting to the Natural Heritage Information Centre.
3. This species is protected by legislation, making it illegal to harass, harm, or kill them. Report any illegal activity related to wildlife at 1-877-TIP-SMNR (847-7667).
4. Be vigilant for snakes crossing roads between March and October, as road mortality poses a significant threat to them. Snakes, being slow-moving (compared to cars) and difficult to spot on roads, are occasionally or intentionally run over. If it's safe, assist snakes in crossing the road in the direction they were headed.

WHAT WE CAN DO TO HELP CONTINUED

5. Remain alert against illegal practices! Some people capture and trade Butler's Gartersnakes which are often mislabeled as Eastern Gartersnakes in pet stores. Make informed choices by avoiding the purchase of wild-caught or misidentified native species as pets.
6. Being a good steward will contribute to the conservation and recovery of these vulnerable species!

Private landowners are integral to species recovery. If you discover a Butler's Gartersnake on your property, consider your eligibility for stewardship programs supporting species protection and recovery.

Visit the following websites to learn more about Butler's Gartersnakes:

- <https://www.ontario.ca/page/butlers-gartersnake>
- <https://www.ontario.ca/page/butlers-gartersnake-recovery-strategy>
- <https://ontarionature.org/programs/community-science/reptile-amphibian-atlas/butlers-gartersnake>
- <https://www.torontozoo.com/adoptapond/speciesguides/butler-garter-snake>

Ojibway Nature Centre
5200 Matchett Rd.
Windsor ON N9C 4E8
(519) 966-5852 | ojibway.ca

WITH SUPPORT FROM
Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks
Species at Risk Stewardship Program

Ontario 

BUTLER'S GARTERSNAKE

in the Ojibway
Prairie Complex



Mariah Alexander

