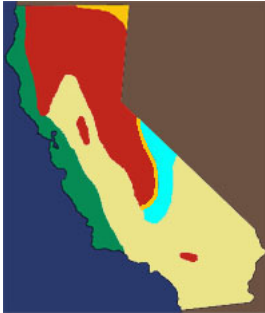


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Thamnophis elegans vagrans - Wandering Gartersnake

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Adult, Inyo County. © [Seth Coffman](#)



Adult, Mono County © [Keith Condon](#)

Adult, Mono County © [Keith Condon](#)



Juvenile (in shed) from the Kern Plateau, Tulare County.



Adult, Spokane County, Washington



Adult, Park County, Wyoming
([More pics from the Northwest](#))

Adult, Coconino County, Arizona
([More pics from the Southwest](#))



In some areas, Wandering Gartersnakes
overwinter in large groups. Here you can
see a mass emergence of Wandering
Gartersnakes and Valley Gartersnakes
in early May, Lincoln County, Wyoming.
© [Leslie Schreiber](#)

Intergrades



Intergrade of *T.e.elegans* and *T. e. vagrans*

Found in northern Siskiyou and Modoc counties and in south central Oregon, this intergrade was once considered a unique subspecies: *Thamnophis elegans biscutatus* - Klamath Gartersnake. More pictures of this snake can be viewed [here](#).

Intergrade of *T.e.elegans* and *T. e. vagrans* from Tuolumne County © Rob Schell

Intergrades occur along the southern and southeastern edge of the Sierras.



Adult, 8,000 ft. east side of the Warner Mountains, Modoc County
© Michael Crews

Habitat



Habitat, (a small trickle in coniferous forest after a forest fire) 6,500 ft., Kern Plateau, Tulare County



Habitat, Mono County

Short Video



Wandering Gartersnakes found beside a creek in the mountains of Arizona.

Description

Nonvenomous

Gartersnakes have toxins in their saliva which can be deadly to their prey and their bite might produce an unpleasant reaction in humans, but they are not considered dangerous to humans.

Size

Thamnophis elegans measures 18 - 43 inches in length (46 - 109 cm).

Appearance

A medium-sized slender snake with a head barely wider than the neck and keeled dorsal scales. Ground color is gray, brown, or greenish and there are typically light dorsal and lateral stripes. The dorsal stripe is yellow, brown, or orangish, but black markings on the edges may make it appear irregular or a series of dark and light dots. The dorsal stripes also fades on the tail. The sides are checkered with black markings. Occasionally these markings will fill in most of the sides between stripes. The underside is light with scattered black markings, often concentrated in the center. The underside may also be black except on the throat and tail.

There is a [melanistic phase](#) of this snake in the Puget Sound area and in British Columbia. Look [here](#) to see a brick red phase from the Sedona area of Arizona.

[Some scale averages](#): Average of 8 upper labial scales, occasionally 7, scales 6 and 7 are enlarged, higher than wide. Average of 10 lower labial scales. The front and rear pair of chin shields are equal in length. The internasals are wider than long and not pointed in front. Average scale count at mid-body is 21, rarely 19.

Behavior

Active in daylight. Chiefly terrestrial - not as dependant on water as other gartersnake species, but more likely to be found near water. When frightened, this species will sometimes seek refuge in vegetation or ground cover, but it will also crawl quickly into water and swim away from trouble. If frightened when picked up, this snake will often strike repeatedly and release cloacal contents and musk.

Diet

This snake eats a wide range of prey (among the widest of any snake species), including amphibians and their larvae, fish, birds, mice, lizards, snakes, worms, leeches, slugs, and snails.

Reproduction

T. elegans breeds primarily in spring, with young born live July - September. High altitude populations of this subspecies in California might breed later.

Range

In California, this subspecies, *Thamnophis elegans vagrans* - Wandering Gartersnake, is found east of the southern Sierra Nevada Mountains. Intergrades occur in the far northeast corner of the state in Modoc and eastern Siskiyou counties. Overall, this subspecies has a very large range, occurring from Canada south into Arizona and New Mexico, and including parts of Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, Idaho, Nevada, Washington, and Oregon.

The species *Thamnophis elegans* - Western Terrestrial Gartersnake, ranges widely from the California coast north into Canada and east to New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, and South Dakota, with an isolated population in Baja California Norte, Mexico.

Habitat

Occurs in a wide variety of habitats. In California, this snake occurs in coniferous forest, sagebrush, grassy meadows, often in the vicinity of water.

The species *Thamnophis elegans* - Western Terrestrial Gartersnake, occurs from sea level to 13,100 ft. (3,990 m) in elevation in Colorado. (Stebbins, 2003)

Taxonomic Notes

T. e. vagrans intergrades with *T. e. elegans* in northeast California in Modoc and eastern Siskiyou counties and in south central Oregon (this snake was formerly classified as the subspecies *Thamnophis elegans biscutatus* - Klamath Gartersnake. Intergrades with *T. e. elegans* also occur along the southern and southeastern edge of the Sierras.

Three subspecies of *Thamnophis elegans* are found in California - *T. e. vagrans* - Wandering Gartersnake, *T. e. e. egans* - Mountain Gartersnake, and *T. e. terrestris* - Coast Gartersnake.

Rossman, Ford, and Seigel (1996) emphasize that a detailed study of geographic variation throughout the range of *Thamnophis elegans* is badly needed.

Bronikowski and Arnold (2001, Copeia 2001:508-513) found several clades within *T. elegans* that do not always follow the subspecies boundaries.

Hammerson (1999, Amphibians and Reptiles of Colorado. 2nd ed. Univ. of Colorado Press) synonymized *T. e. arizonae* and *T. e. vascotanneri* but retained three subspecies, *T. e. vagrans*, *T. e. elegans*, and *T. e. terrestris*.

Conservation Issues ([Conservation Status](#))

This species is not known to be threatened, but gartersnakes have been negatively impacted by competition with introduced bullfrogs and non-native fish in some areas.

Taxonomy

Family	Colubridae	Colubrids
Genus	<i>Thamnophis</i>	North American Gartersnakes
Species	<i>elegans</i>	Western Terrestrial Gartersnake
Subspecies	<i>vagrans</i>	Wandering Gartersnake

Original Description

Thamnophis elegans - (Baird and Girard, 1853) - Cat. N. Amer. Rept., Pt. 1, p. 34

Thamnophis elegans vagrans - (Baird and Girard, 1853) - Cat. N. Amer. Rept., Pt. 1, p. 35

from [Original Description Citations for the Reptiles and Amphibians of North America](#) © Elin Beltz

Meaning of the Scientific Name

Thamnophis - Greek - thamnos - shrub or bush, and ophis - snake, serpent
elegans - Latin - fine or elegant -- "delicately carinated"

vagrans - Latin - wandering - Yarrow, 1875: "rightly called from its wide range"

from [Scientific and Common Names of the Reptiles and Amphibians of North America](#) - [Explained](#) © Elin Beltz

Alternate Names

Formerly known as Intermountain Wandering Garter Snake

Other California Gartersnakes

[T. a. atratus](#) - Santa Cruz Gartersnake
[T. a. hydrophilus](#) - Oregon Gartersnake
[T. a. zaxanthus](#) - Diablo Range Gartersnake
[T. couchii](#) - Sierra Gartersnake
[T. gigas](#) - Giant Gartersnake
[T. e. elegans](#) - Mountain Gartersnake
[T. e. terrestris](#) - Coast Gartersnake
[T. hammondi](#) - Two-striped Gartersnake
[T. m. marcianus](#) - Marcy's Checkered Gartersnake
[T. ordinoides](#) - Northwestern Gartersnake
[T. s. fitchi](#) - Valley Gartersnake
[T. s. infernalis](#) - California Red-sided Gartersnake
[T. s. tetrataenia](#) - San Francisco Gartersnake

More Information and References

[Natureserve Explorer](#)

[California Dept. of Fish and Game](#)

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Conservation Status

The following status listings come from the [Special Animals List](#) which is published several times each year by the California Department of Fish and Game.

This snake is not included on the Special Animals List, which indicates that there are no significant conservation concerns for it in California.

Organization	Status Listing
U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA)	None
California Endangered Species Act (CESA)	None
California Department of Fish and Game	None
Bureau of Land Management	None
USDA Forest Service	None
Natureserve Global Conservation Status Ranks	
World Conservation Union - IUCN Red List	