

FISH CREEK PROVINCIAL PARK

Snakes in the Park

PARK NOTES

A Local Treasure

Fish Creek Provincial Park has several of the known snake hibernacula (group wintering dens) in south central Alberta. They are noteworthy not only because of their location within the City of Calgary, but because they are important for the survival of both red-sided and wandering garter snakes.

Snakes are considered an indicator species. Scientists feel that if healthy populations of snakes are present, the ecosystem they call home is healthy as well.

An Important Part of the Ecosystem

Garter snakes are the most common snakes in Alberta. Harmless to humans, these reptiles are efficient hunters of insects, slugs, earthworms, frogs, minnows, and occasionally mice and small birds. The snakes are hunted in turn by hawks, herons, raccoons, foxes, and coyotes.

Garter snakes are well adapted to life in both wetlands and dryer areas. Their stripes and colours act as camouflage and help the snakes elude predators.

In the spring snakes emerge from their hibernaculum. After leaving the group wintering den, they mate and then lead a solitary life. They give birth to 10 or more young up to 15 cm long. Adults grow up to 130 cm in length, and can live up to four years in the wild.

Delicate Balance

Human activity, erosion, and disturbances from domestic pets combine to create a difficult set of challenges for snakes. Ongoing studies in the Park indicate that the snake population fluctuates greatly. Researchers believe this suggests a delicate balance in the ability of the snakes to maintain a stable population.

What If We See a Snake?

Snakes are elusive creatures that shy away from the heavy footsteps of humans. If you are fortunate enough to encounter a snake, consider the following:

- do not attempt to capture, disturb, or harm the snake
- leave the snake plenty of room to escape
- do not remove the snake from the Park
- do not modify or damage any snake denning sites
- record the date, time, location, and report the sighting to the Park office at (403) 297-5293

You can learn far more about snake habits if you stop and simply watch them.

Living with wildlife means respecting their space.
Help do your part to ensure garter snakes are always an important part of this ecosystem.



Wandering Garter Snake
Photo courtesy of Steve Brechtel



Red-Sided Garter Snake
Photo courtesy of Drajs Vujnovic

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Alberta