

# Snakes in the 'Gate

BY JASON REILLY

As you may have heard, southwestern Oregon is recognized for its high levels of biological diversity. Along with conifers, butterflies, and amphibians, snakes are one group of species that exhibit considerable diversity within southwestern Oregon. In fact, the warm climate and broad array of habitat types found in Jackson and Josephine Counties result in the highest snake diversity across all of Oregon. Of the 15 snake species native to Oregon, 13 can be found right here in our own backyard! The Applegate Valley ('Gate) in particular is a hot spot for the more uncommon and rare species. Let's talk about a few of the more unusual or noteworthy.

## Garter Snakes

The garter snake (*Thamnophis* sp.) is one of the more common types of snake that most people encounter, although there are actually four distinct species in our region. Members of this genus get their common name, garter snake, because most garter snakes have three distinct stripes down their backs (one down the center and one on either side) that give them an appearance similar to an old-fashioned garter. The common garter snake (*Thamnophis sirtalis*) is frequently encountered in our valley habitats and is in fact the widest ranging reptile in North America. The less common northwestern garter snake (*T. ordinoides*) has adapted to life in the Pacific Northwest (found from extreme northern California to British Columbia) and inhabits densely forested areas where it feeds on slugs, earthworms, snails and even the occasional salamander. The Pacific Coast aquatic garter snake (*T. atratus*) is more closely associated with water than any other northwestern snake, and can be found along the main stem

of the Applegate River and probably a few of its larger tributaries. The western terrestrial garter snake (*T. elegans*) inhabits a variety of habitat types from forested stands to oak and chaparral. There is considerable variation in the appearance of these snakes both within and between species, and distinguishing each species from one another is not always an easy task, even for the experienced "herper" (short for herpetologist, those of us who study snakes).

## Rubber Boa

What, you didn't know we had boas in the 'Gate? Don't worry, the rubber boa (*Charina bottae*) rarely exceeds two feet in length and is a very docile species. A fairly drab snake, its smooth scales and loose skin gives this uniformly light tan to dark brown to olive green snake a rubbery appearance. When observed up close, the small eye of the rubber boa reveals a vertical pupil like a cat's eye. The tail of the rubber boa is remarkably similar in shape and size to the head, and in fact this is by design. This snake uses its tail as a decoy while it consumes its favorite food, young mice and shrews. Often one can observe scars on the tail of adult rubber boas, left from the attacks of mother mice while defending their young, mistakenly distracted by the tail while the head eats the young. Hey, I didn't say this was going to be pretty.

## King snakes

King snakes (*Lampropeltis* sp.) share a distinct color pattern that is easily recognizable. Almost all of them have a pattern of alternating bands or rings of various colors across the length of the body. Each species has a different color pattern of bands. The Applegate is home to two species, the common king

snake (*L. getula*) and the California mountain king snake (*L. zonata*). The common king snake has a pattern of black, sometimes chocolate brown and white bands, whereas the California mountain king snake has a pattern of black and white bands, with the black bands being more or less divided by a vibrant red band.

The common king snake, so named because it is distributed across much of the southern United States, reaches the northernmost extent of its range in the Rogue and Umpqua drainages. For this reason, the common king snake is rare in Oregon. However, this species can be found right here, as it is known to occur in the lower-elevation valley bottoms and river corridors of the Rogue and Applegate Rivers.

In comparison to the common king snake, the California mountain king snake can be found in a greater variety of locations across southwestern Oregon, but is by no means a common species. Sightings of this species are fairly widespread in our region, but are concentrated around the rocky canyon stretches of the Rogue, Applegate and Illinois Rivers. These areas offer premium habitat for this species, where their preferred prey, the western fence lizard (you may know it as the "blue-belly"), is found in abundance. This animal's vibrant coloration is truly remarkable, and most people who encounter this species are struck by its beauty, even if they tend to hate or fear snakes.

## Striped Whipsnake

Although this snake has a fairly large distribution that covers much of eastern Oregon, the striped whipsnake (*Masticophis lateralis*) is perhaps the rarest snake of our region. It is known only from a handful of locations along the Applegate River and around the Table Rocks. As a resident of the 'Gate, you should consider yourself lucky if you get the chance to observe one.

Adults of this species are often large (four feet in length) and have a relatively large eyeball in relation to the size of the head. The back is dark and they have two yellow or cream stripes running



Top photo: Garter snake (photo by Adam Simpson, [www.naturalist.tryonfriends.org](http://www.naturalist.tryonfriends.org)).  
Middle photo: A rubber boa in defensive posture. Note the tail is being presented as a decoy, while the head is safely hidden in the middle of the coils.  
Bottom photo: A California mountain king snake. This smaller individual was found basking along the Illinois River.

lengthwise along each side of the back. Superficially similar to garter snakes, you can distinguish this species from garter snakes by the lack of a third stripe down the middle of the back. The underside of this snake is a light cream or yellow towards the head, but as you move closer to the tip of the tail it becomes progressively more and more of a salmon pink. A very fast and alert snake, this species is active throughout the day even on the hottest days of summer when most other snakes shift to mornings and evenings.

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The striped whipsnake.

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