

Acton WildAware Beacon Article
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Snakes and Turtles Commonly Seen in Acton

The Garter Snake is commonly seen in Acton and was designated as the state reptile of Massachusetts in 2007. It is easily recognized by the long stripes down its body, reminiscent of the old fashioned strips of fabric called *garters* that held up stockings. Garter Snakes are often seen in garden, field and forest habitats near a water source. The Garter snake eats tadpoles and frogs, fish, small mammals, earthworms and insects. It is harmless to people. Snakes are nearsighted and rely on feeling the ground vibrate with the bones of their jaws, allowing them to detect footsteps and other movement to alert them to what is going on around them. Because Garter snakes camouflage well, and cannot detect that you are approaching until you are quite near, they sometimes seem to appear out of nowhere and slither away quickly when you walk near them.

As snakes grow, their skin does not grow with them so they need to shed their skins a few times a year. Shedding begins at the snake's lips. Because the eye sheds too, vision becomes cloudy and the snake may hide for safety. As the snake moves around the skin pulls off inside out, (like pulling a sweater over your head) all in one piece.

Northern Water Snakes live in Acton wetlands, eating a varied diet that includes small mammals and amphibians, often feeding at night on minnows and fish. They are recognized as a beneficial species for eating an abundance of mice. The Northern Water Snake can grow up to 55" long, appearing as loops of bicycle inner tubes when basking. Its coloring is made up of various patterns of gray, brown and black. Animals that prey on them include raccoon, foxes, opossums, snapping turtles and other snakes. They will not go out of their way to be confrontational. However, Northern Water Snakes will vigorously defend themselves against predators with repeated non-venomous bites until released. They are of very little risk to people as long as they are not provoked.

To help you identify native snakes, the "Field Guide to the Reptiles of Massachusetts" from Mass Wildlife includes complete information and full color photos of all the 14 species of snakes found in Massachusetts:
<http://www.mass.gov/eea/agencies/dfg/dfw/publications/order-form-for-dfw-publications.pdf>

Turtles

Painted Turtles have Common conservation status and live in Acton's shallow ponds and wetlands where they can find places to bask in the sun for several hours a day. The Painted Turtle has a smooth olive green shell and yellow and red stripes on its neck. The shell's edge has black and red patterns giving it an artistically painted look. Painted Turtles see in color and find food with their senses of sight and smell. Their diet includes aquatic plants, small fish and snails. Its strong, hard shell protects the turtle from

predators. If caught, it will expel the air from its lungs with a loud hiss, giving it extra space inside its shell to pull in its head, legs and tail until the frustrated predator gives up. Turtles' shells are covered with plates called scutes that have nerve endings which allow the turtle to feel when something touches its shell.

Snapping Turtles are listed as having Common conservation status in Massachusetts and live in a variety of Acton wetlands. Their diet is varied and becomes mostly vegetarian as they grow older. They are large turtles, weighing up to 60 pounds. It is thought that because the Snapping Turtles shell is too small for it to retreat into when in danger, it has adapted to defend itself with powerful jaws that can cause significant injury. It is best to give them plenty of space.

Although turtles spend most of their time in water, all turtles lay their eggs on dry land. At this time of year, late spring to early summer, female turtles must often cross roadways to and from the nest site. Please be Wild Aware and keep alert to turtles in the roadways. When helping a turtle across a road, carry it to the side of the road it is traveling **toward**.

Resources:

[The Snake Scientist](#), Sy Montgomery

[Take a Look at Snakes](#), Betsy Maestro

[Saving Turtles](#), Sue Carstairs

<http://www.massaudubon.org/learn/nature-wildlife/reptiles-amphibians/turtles/turtle-species-in-massachusetts>

Paula Goodwin is a member of the Acton Conservation Commission who introduced WildAware with Acton Natural Resource Assistant Bettina Abe. WildAware is a program sponsored by the Town of Acton Natural Resources Department that began in September and will continue through the summer of 2016. The purpose of WildAware is to educate the community about the existence and habits of wild creatures, and the goal is increased community awareness of shared habitats. For information, call 978-929-6634 or send email to nr@acton-ma.gov.