

The Beach Grove Garter Snakes – Year 2025

The Snakes

No sightings of snakes during the winter. No sightings of our snakes named Olive and Grandma this year. A new girl appeared in the early Spring. Her markings are that of a Common Garter but she didn't look common to me. In the sun, the gold on the top of her head and the bars along the length of her body glistened. She's large with a body width of at least 1 inch. I've named her Caramel as her not usual coloring reminded me of the small caramel toffee candy that I ate as a kid. I had no idea before getting involved with this snake work that an ordinary garter snake could look so striking.



The Spring and Fall snake seasons appear to have lasted longer than the previous two years. The Spring emerge began on Feb. 27, two weeks earlier than in 2024. Last year's emerge was on Mar 12, and again, it was two weeks earlier than in 2023. Possibly climate change is a factor. Maybe it's to do with the locals who now feed me information when they see them on the dyke trail and hibernaculum area. In the Spring, the snakes hung about the hibernaculum and my last Spring time sighting of them was on Apr. 23. Dec. 6 was my last snake observation for the year.

Snake movement was all around the rocks and especially so at the backside of the rocks. It was like my workload doubled having to monitor from the trail and beach side when people arrived in both areas. I needed help. I decided to set up a temporary barrier next to the rock groove, very visible and safe for those passing by. It was effective and pedestrians and their dogs "gave the snakes space and distance". Only the off-leash dogs ignored it, stepping over the barrier to sniff in the rock groove. One local told me the barrier is a good idea. Her grandson goes to the local school and she knows they teach the children about the

snakes. She said, "You're doing good work here. What you tell people is helpful and they in turn let others know".



I saw my first mating ball this Spring on Mar. 24. This date also showed the highest snake count of 28 (total number of snakes observed on one walk-about the hibernaculum area). The mating period lasted two weeks. I've been tracking the number of mating balls seen in a season and there were 20 this year. This is double what I observed last year. Even though Apr. 5 had a summer temperature of 17C, it turned out to be the last mating day for the snake season and I saw only one mating ball.

Our daily high count of sightings this Fall is deficient as I wasn't present from Oct 8 thru Nov 9 due to a health event. The snakes had a long summer and their migration back to the rocks spanned over weeks. Likely, a peak high count would have occurred during the second and third weeks of October. After mid-October the rainy weather set in and the sunny days for basking were sporadic. The Fall snake season, the longest yet, lasted 12 weeks. There was heavy greenery around the rocks this Fall making spotting snakes a challenge. Good for the snakes, though, as it provides protection for them.

Dyke Activity

Based on my observations when I've been on the trail in the morning or afternoon hours, traffic volume this Spring, Summer and Fall is lower. I think the weather not so much a factor as temperatures were similar to last year. However, come mid-October the rains set in putting a damper on people getting out onto the trail. With much lower traffic volume I decided not to put effort into tracking it except on days when it got busy. The only day this Spring was on Mar 2: cycles=86, pedestrians=113, dogs=36 and horses=5. Compare this with last Spring when there were many, many high traffic days throughout the season with cyclist numbers 175+. In the Fall, a sunny stat holiday on Nov. 11 brought out the pedestrians and horses. On that day I got a picture of a little trailhead congestion with pedestrians and horses next to the rocks. It doesn't compare to what I saw in Spring 2023 when snakes and people volume was very high next to the rocks, but it gives you an idea of what happens at the trailhead.



At our 17A trailhead, the access trail has better visibility of traffic in either direction due to the tree canopy having been pruned.

Metro Van Parks will be providing some presence on our dyke trail. We may learn more about this come the Spring.

The Cycle Station

People using the cycle station are stepping into the hibernaculum space to pump their tires. One day, four people circle the pump station to pump up a tire. In the early Spring, locals resuming their trail walking after a winter absence, would comment to me "why is that there".

During the time I spent at the rocks, I didn't see the cycle station being greatly used but children visiting the beach had fun playing firemen with the cycle pump.

I wonder how weather-proof the cycle station is with salt water. On Feb. 28, at the trailhead, the high tide deposited eelgrass onto the dyke trail. The cycle pump station and bike rack were covered in the eelgrass. Further up the trail, such as where the garbage cans are, the trail sits higher and it wasn't affected by the high tide.

Cyclists

This year, I see the cyclists doing single file when passing pedestrians and horses on the trail. However, I've experienced the club riders crowding the trail (they wear fancy gear).

There are new, much younger, electric cyclists riding the trail. Teen boys, not old enough to drive a car yet, enjoy their new-found freedom speeding along the trail.

Behaviour

I decided this Spring to stay back and only observe people and dog behaviour around the snakes, thus not doing any snake education work. On my 3rd visit to the rocks, I watched a leashed dog walking in the rock groove with its head low down. The dog comes to a spot where earlier I saw snakes basking. The dog stops and drops its head right down into the groove. The dog's head suddenly shoots up with its front right leg up in the air. The dog stares down. This got the dog owner's attention. She stared down at the rock groove then quickly pulled the dog away from it. Well, my plan to stay back lasted a total of two visits. I'm not as thick-skinned as I thought I could be.

I wasn't expecting this to happen. On Feb 27, a couple arrive with their beautiful long-furred orange cat that is on a leash. They walk by the rocks and then down to the beach where the cat investigates the edge of the backshore. It's early days so I don't say anything to them about the snakes thinking this may just be a one-time visit. A week later they return. Snakes are in the rock groove and on the backshore. It's time to chat. They are quite interested to learn about the snakes. I describe where the snakes bask around the rocks and beach area. They truly had no idea that a cat attack could be life-ending for a snake. After that day, I didn't see them back at the rocks.

In early April, when many snakes are showing and mating is prevalent, the most unwelcomed people behaviour occurred. A family I've not seen before arrives at the rocks and "hunts" the snakes. The adult told me they're counting snakes but their method was concerning. The adult and 3 children climb onto the center of the rocks and when a snake was spotted in a crevice, they chased it while running the rocks. It was a tough sell for me to convince the adult to do their spotting from the edge of the rocks. The children obliged but the adult was peeved with me. I provided her the DNS snake brochure. That night, I contacted a few of the local neighbours to help me out at the rocks the next day. My friends came, and wouldn't you know it, the family didn't show.

Three days later, Apr 4, the problem family returns and there's more of them. It was the Wild West at the rocks on this day. An adult woman was verbally very nasty to me. She bad-mouthed me to other people at the beach. They were not receptive to her and she realized they're friends of mine. After some time, the family saw that I wasn't leaving so they head out, but not without parting words from the nasty woman that she will call the police on me. I stayed

at the rocks awhile longer but the police never showed. As I walked home that day, I then notice how shaken I am. I send an email to Delta Naturalists executive providing a summary of what happened. Delta Nats (Nicki) sent out a call for help email to the members and three responded to me.

The next day the problem family returns and there's even more of them (about 12). Delta Nats members, Annie, Lisa and Jonathan are with me and we are kept busy chatting with visitors about the snakes. The family group stays down on the beach watching me. Later, when I'm busy on the beach side, the problem family passes the rocks, and by Annie. Annie asks if they'd like to see a snake and an adult male says with an air of annoyance "we've seen lots of snakes" and down the trail they go. Our Beach Grove neighbourhood is a friendly place so interaction of this kind is not usual for me.

The Delta Naturalists executive provided additional support. The drama at the rocks spurred Elizabeth to write a letter to the Delta Optimist that was published:

Editor:

I have written a couple of letters over the past few years about the harassment of garter snakes at the Boundary Bay hibernaculum. In spite of signs asking people to respect them, people are still disturbing the snakes by walking on the rocks that constitute their home or picking them up. One of the Delta Naturalist Society's members has been kind enough to volunteer a good deal of her personal time to: keep watch over the snakes, educate people about our local garter snakes, and provide valuable information to our Society and to Metro Vancouver Parks. In a community where good deeds are frequently recognized and applauded this volunteer is being subjected to verbal abuse. I'm not sure where the expression "no good deed goes unpunished" came from but I hate to think there's truth in it. A couple of other members have now offered to help and I'd like to think they, along with the original volunteer, will be treated with respect. If they ask people not to walk on the rocks or refrain from picking up snakes, they are not being rude or presumptuous, they are doing the right thing. Harassment of the snakes is not just unkind, it's illegal.

For more information on the Boundary Bay garter snakes, see our pamphlet at https://deltanaturalists.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/snakes_final-2.pdf

Elizabeth Perrin

Director, Delta Naturalists Society

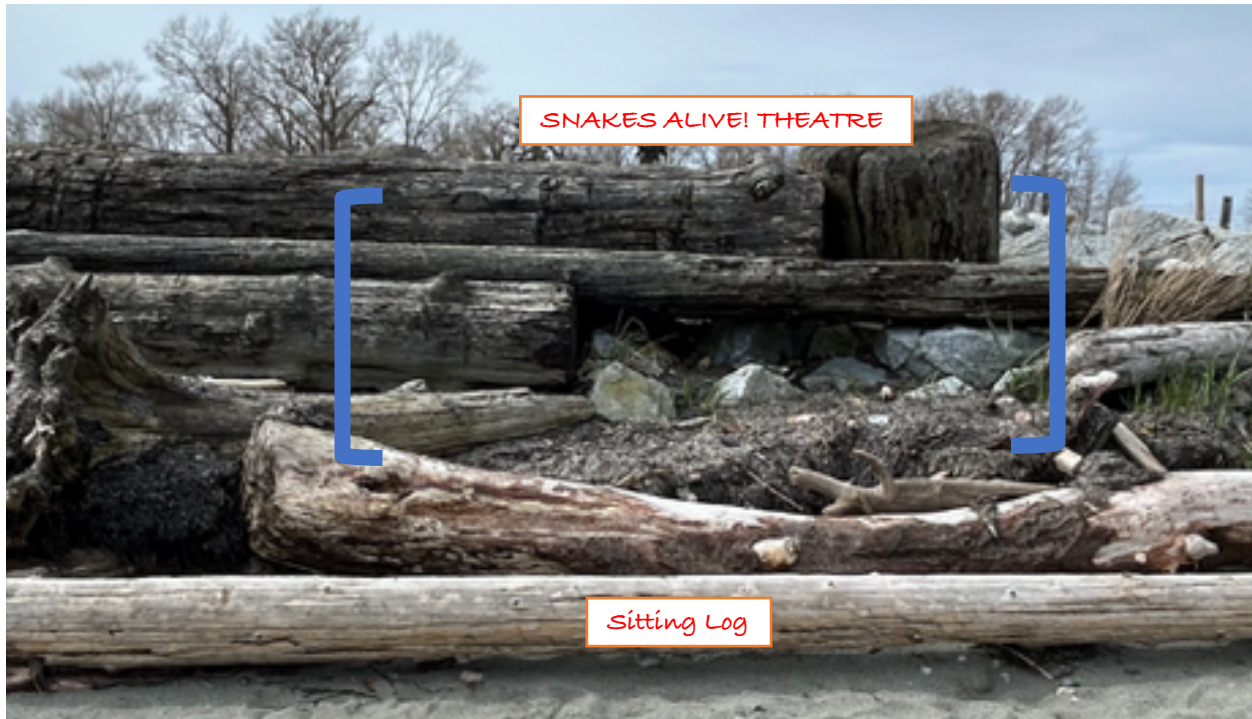
On Apr 13, the eldest girl (about 12 years) and a man who are with the problem family appear. This time the girl was respectful of the snakes, not going on the rocks and observing from the trail and the beach sand.

During that latter part of the mating period, I put in long hours at the rocks to ensure our snakes would have protection. I'm so grateful for the help and support from friends and our Delta Naturalists executive and members.

Highlights

The snakes provided some good entertainment during the mating time this year. It still amazes me that we get to watch the natural ways of the snakes, as long as the space and distance is given to them. On Apr. 5, my day is ending (3:45) and not many snakes show around the hibernaculum. Traffic is quiet on the trail so I decide it's a good time to check out the edge of the backshore leading up to the garbage can. About half-way up, there's a vigorous mating ball with 7 snakes. It was amusing when the big female gave them all the slip. The slim male snakes try to figure out where she is, frantically circling and colliding into each other on the spot. I followed the big female as she beelined it along the backshore edge until settling some 30 feet away from the frantic males.

The perfect setting for the children to do snake watching was at the backside of the rocks where the beach sand is. With a long log conveniently placed by the high tide about 6 feet away from the rocks, we could all watch a “Snakes Alive!” reality show on our wild and natural 12-foot screen. Four children (ages 3 to 4) and their caregivers join me to watch the snakes moving about the backside of the rocks. With it being mating season, there are 5 slim snakes weaving in and out of the rocks and logs looking for a female. All the children are seated on the log and the 4-year-old instructs the other children, “Don’t move or the snakes will go away”. Each time, when a snake would be on the sand 2 feet away from us, the youngest boy got excited, jerking his body forward causing the snake to turn back. Such a great experience for the children to enjoy the wonder of these snakes in this natural setting.



On another occasion, a grandmother with her two grandchildren (3 and 4 years old) arrived at the rocks to see the snakes. The little girl asks her grandmother “Can I touch a snake” and grandmother replies “Only if you’re given permission to”. I invite them to sit on the log at the Snakes Alive! theatre telling them, “For sure, we’ll see snakes here”, and we did. The slim male snakes weaved in and out around the rocks quickly. One snake came down from the rocks and headed to where the children are sitting. It slithered very close to the little girl’s feet. Oh, that was too close for the little girl! She gets up and cuddles next to grandma.

Data and Numbers

We have three years of various data collected for our Beach Grove hibernaculum. One of the numbers gathered estimates the number of days in one year when the garter snakes are active on the dyke trail and the hibernaculum area. For this year, 2025, the total estimated days is 150. Whew! That’s nearly half a year of snake activity. If any of you share my enthusiasm for numbers, the next page will be up your alley.

	2023	2024	2025
Estimated number of days over the year when the garter snakes are active on the dyke trail and the hibernaculum area	130	105	150
Winter sightings			
Begins	-	Feb-03	-
Ends	-	Feb-26	-
Total # of sightings	-	7	0
Temperature	-	Winter temps	-
Spring emerge:			
Begins	Mar-20	Mar-12	Feb-27
Ends	May-08	Apr-18	Apr-23
# of days	52	38	56
Snake high count *:			
Total	78+	28+	28+
Date	Apr-11	Mar-24	Mar-24
Spring temperature range	Summer temps	9C --> 16C	11C --> 17C
Mating period:			
Begins	Apr-11	Mar-17	Mar-24
Ends	Apr-25	Mar-24	Apr-05
# of days	15	8	13
Number of mating balls	Many **	10+	20+
Fall migration:			
First sighting	Aug-31	Sep-18	Sep-03
Last sighting at hibernaculum	Nov-16	Oct-28	Dec-06
# of days	78	44	94
Snake high count *:			
Total	12	15	4 ++
Date	Nov-02	Oct-12	Oct-06
Fall temperature range	22C --> 8C	20C --> 11C	18C --> 10C

* Snake high count is the total number of snakes observed in one walk-about the hibernaculum area

** Spring 2023 - One mating ball displayed as a tower of dozens of snakes; there were many other small mating balls

++ Fall 2025 - Count deficient due to limited attendance at the hibernaculum