
THAMNOPHIS, PART VI

THAMNOPHIS (RADIX) BRACHYSTOMA

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NAME AND SPECIES

Common names for this snake are New York dwarf garter snake, eastern Butler's garter snake, striped snake, short-mouthed snake - the last being a translation of the scientific name. These names make it clear that the differences between this snake and *Thamnophis butleri* are small. In 1905 C.C. Whittaker made detailed comparisons from which he concluded that the names were held to be synonyms, which means that there were not enough differences to consider both animals as different species. Later on Schmidt (1953) showed they were again considered as separate species. Also, there is some difference of opinion as to whether *Thamnophis brachystoma* has to be considered as a species or as a subspecies of *Thamnophis radix*.

DESCRIPTION

The ground colour of this snake is brown, with three yellow stripes. The lateral stripes are on the 2nd and 3rd scale rows, occasionally involving the lower part of row 4. Each lateral stripe has a tendency to be bordered by a narrow

black line. The dark spots between the stripes, so common in many other kinds of garter snakes, are lacking or only faintly indicated.

The head is -as indicated by the snake's name- relatively small, and not wider than the neck. As for the difference from *Thamnophis butleri*: the head of Butlers gartersnake is a little wider and larger, and the number of dorsal scale rows in Butler's snake is normally 19, in the shortheaded 17.

Thamnophis brachystoma is a small snake, the smallest among the garter snakes: normal adult length is 36-46 cm, with a record of 55 cm.

DISTRIBUTION

The range is south-western New York and north-western Pennsylvania; introduced and settled at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It is found at an elevation of 500 to 2000 feet. For further information see the distribution map.

HABITAT

Various habitats were recorded for this snake, including a low wet meadow bordering a creek, beneath a low clump of grass in wet situations, in the vicinity of streams, under stones, on a pasture hillside bordering a creek, under planks in a pasture, and in piles of stones on banks or terraces in the vicinity of a marsh. They are usually near if not in the water (Wright & Wright, 1957).

THE VIVARIUM

I keep this species in a cage measuring 40 x 40 x 40 cm (lwh), in which heat and light is provided



Map 1. Distribution area of *Thammophis radix brachystoma*.

for by a 15 Watt bulb. The temperature is about 35°C in summer and about 22°C in winter. There is a water basin with a diameter of 14 cm. I prefer peat as a ground substrate. Of course there are little stubs for climbing and hiding.

FOOD

Like Butler's gartersnake, *Thamnophis brachystoma* feeds largely on earthworms. This explains why it doesn't eat fish very well in captivity. I haven't been very succesful yet in trying to accustom it to eating fish.

BREEDING

This snake is ovoviviparous, like all gartersnakes. Its mating behaviour is similar to that of other gartersnakes too, the male crawling over the back of the female, trying to introduce his hemipenis into her cloaca. Mating is in April and May. The number of young is 4 to 10, being born from July to September.

Unfortunately I have not been able to breed this species yet. I have observed at least one copulation, which didn't prove to be succesful.

CONCLUSION

Thamnophis brachystoma is a docile species that is easy to tame and therefore very suitable for novice snake-keepers.

LITTERATURE

Conant, R, 1975. A Field Guide to Reptiles and Amphibians of Eastern/Central North America. 2nd ed. Boston.

Wright, A.H. and A.A. Wright, 1957. Handbook of snakes of the United States and Canada. Vol. 1. Ithaca and London. 4th printing. p. 218-222.