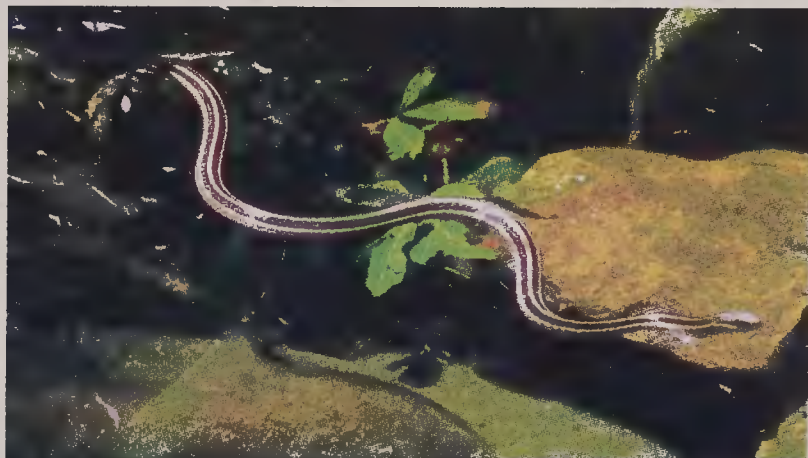


# Ribbons and Garters

By Frederick Boyce

A number of observant visitors to the North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores during the month of August were treated to the sight of a bonus animal in the aquarium's new Eagle Landing habitat. Throughout much of the month, a slender little snake—dark brown with three conspicuous golden-yellow stripes running lengthwise down its body—could be seen lounging around the eagles'



Eastern ribbon snake taking a dip in the eagle pool at the aquarium—Photos by Fred Boyce

pool, sometimes in the water and sometimes draped on the rocks around the water's edge.

It was an eastern ribbon snake, one of the three most commonly encountered snakes on Bogue Banks and aptly named as it does indeed

resemble a length of ribbon. The other two snakes often encountered on the island are black racers and eastern rat snakes.

Ribbon snakes are closely related to garter snakes, which look somewhat similar and often have longitudinal stripes as well (they were actually named for the striped men's garters that were fashionable in the 19th century). Ribbon snakes are more slender and lightly built than garter snakes, with very long tails and narrow heads with large round eyes. They also have a noticeable light-colored scale located just in front of the eye that garter snakes do not have.



Newborn ribbon snake found in the aquarium's eagle habitat—Photo by Ara McLanahan

As there are no garter snakes on Bogue Banks, distinguishing the two species on the island is fairly moot. However, there are garter snakes on the adjacent mainland, but in Carteret County and along the coast in general, they are not so prominently striped, being marked instead by a series of small black spots or short crossbars that are irregular in shape. They are two-toned in color, being plain brown above and light grayish along the lower sides. While there may be

a single light stripe running down the middle of the back, our coastal garter snakes are quite a bit different in appearance from typical eastern garter snakes, which tend to be more greenish in color with prominent yellow stripes. There is also a very interesting and beautiful red (erythristic) variation of the eastern garter snake that is occasionally found in the coastal plain of North and South Carolina. All are just geographic color variations of the eastern garter snake.

Ribbon snakes are not as variable as garter snakes and tend to look pretty much the same throughout their range, though our local specimens seem to be particularly vivid and highly attractive. The golden stripes practically glow in the sunlight and are set off very nicely by their rich, dark brown ground color.

Ribbon and garter snakes are closely allied with nonvenomous water snakes and together are known as "natrine" snakes. They favor moist, wetland habitats and cold-blooded prey such as fish and amphibians, but the more terrestrial garter snakes will also eat earthworms, spiders and sometimes small mammals.



Coastal phase eastern garter snake in Carteret County

The ribbon snake is more semi-aquatic and likely to be seen swimming on the surface or foraging along the edges of ponds or waterways in search of frogs, tadpoles and small fish, so it isn't surprising that one would make herself at home

around the eagles' very nicely appointed pool. (With ribbon, garter and water snakes, adult females are much larger than males and can easily be distinguished by a practiced eye.) The main problem with the eagles' pool, from a snake's point of view, is that it is completely devoid of fish, something that our visitor must have eventually figured out as she seems to have moved on and hasn't been seen there recently. Meanwhile, the pool has become populous with tadpoles so perhaps she will be back. I certainly hope so, as I have long been a proponent of having outdoor snake habitats along our marsh boardwalk.

I found it rather gratifying to see this pretty little snake attracting so much attention from our visitors, who were photographing and enjoying her almost as much as they were the eagles themselves (who, by the way, were completely indifferent to their unassuming housemate).

Ribbon and garter snakes give birth to live young (again, like water snakes), and often have fairly large litters. The babies (neonates) are extremely small and can easily coil up on a dime. Unlike rat snakes or black racers, which do not look like their parents but undergo what is called an ontogenetic color change as they mature, newborn ribbon and garter snakes are perfect miniatures of the adults. These tiny snakes are born in mid-summer and are likely to turn up just about anywhere as they take on the big wide world. One of our staff actually found one of these miniscule babies while cleaning the eagles' sleeping quarters, so it's very possible that our poolside visitor is also a mom. Don't be alarmed if you come upon one of these little snakelings in your house or carport—they are, like the adults, perfectly harmless.

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