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Snakes alive!

Health/science



The San Francisco garter ranks among the country's 'most beautiful' snakes.

Rancho del Oso find revives interest in rare San Francisco garter snake

By DEBORAH E. BARNES
 Special to the Sentinel

IF A SMALL red-headed snake slides into your back yard, don't kill it. It could be a San Francisco garter snake, a rare and endangered species that was captured alive recently in Santa Cruz County for the first time.

"This snake is a hometown kid and it's in trouble," said Sam McGinnis, professor of biology at California State University at Hayward. McGinnis has been studying snakes for 30 years.

"It also is perhaps the most beautiful snake in North America," he said.

The San Francisco garter snake's brick-red head distinguishes it from most other garter snakes. Its brilliant aqua belly matches a broad blue-green stripe that runs down the middle of its back. Bold black, red, and ebony stripes flank the center stripe.

It is about as big around as your pinky finger and can grow as long as 2½ feet.

The snake prefers to live in shallow

ponds and wetlands, where it hunts frogs — primarily Pacific tree frogs and red-legged frogs, said McGinnis.

The San Francisco garter snake was fairly common before 1960, according to McGinnis. It is named after the peninsula, not the city, and lives primarily in the marshlands of San Mateo County.

But as San Francisco Bay Area residents built homes and highways, they destroyed the ponds the snake needs to survive. The number of San Francisco garter snakes dropped dramatically, with perhaps fewer than 2,000 remaining.

"Collecting cults" also have contributed to the snake's demise, according to the Cal State professor. Since it is beautiful and lives well in captivity, the snake fetches a high price on the black market.

When federal and state governments began passing laws to protect rare and endangered species in the late 1960s, the San Francisco garter snake was one of the first species placed on the

endangered list, McGinnis said.

Until recently, the snake had never been captured alive in Santa Cruz County. But on Sept. 24, naturalist Diane West-Bourke caught one near the turtle pond at Rancho del Oso Nature and History Center near Waddell Creek north of Davenport.

Rancho del Oso, located just off Highway 1 about 20 miles north of Santa Cruz, is part of the Big Basin Park system. Once the homestead of Theodore Hoover, President Herbert Hoover's brother, it is open to the public on Saturdays and Sundays from 1 to 4 p.m. West-Bourke, a state parks employee, has lived and worked at Rancho del Oso for the past five years.

"On that particular morning, I was walking to the mailbox. And here was this snake in the middle of the road. It was so colorful and beautiful that my adrenaline went instantly pumping. I quickly went up to it and picked it up," West-Bourke recalled.

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Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Rancho del Oso naturalist Dianne West-Bourke caught a San Francisco garter snake on park property.

Snake watch

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Ranger Paul Keel from Ano Nuevo State Reserve examined the snake, determining that it was a 2-year-old female, about 21½ inches long.

"She was a lively little thing. She didn't bite me, but she squirmed and musked me a lot," West-Bourke said. When snakes get alarmed, some release a strong-smelling musk to drive away danger.

"When we fed her, what a display," continued West-Bourke. "Once we put a tree frog in. She grabbed it by one back leg and started swallowing. She just kept swallowing and swallowing until only the frog's front arms stuck out of her mouth. Then the frog covered her eyes with its hands. I wish I had had a camera."

West-Bourke kept the snake in a terrarium for three weeks, then released it near the turtle pond.

Although this was the first confirmed report of a San Francisco garter snake in Santa Cruz County, West-Bourke said that they have been looking for the snake at Rancho Del Oso because the habitat is so perfect.

In fact, for the past 40 years, Hul-

da Hoover McLean, who grew up at Rancho del Oso, has offered prizes to children who capture live re-headed snakes on the ranch.

Actually, about three years ago, Ranger Paul Keel discovered the first San Francisco garter snake at Rancho del Oso. But it was dead in the road, run over by a truck.

"Some people thought that the snake had been planted there," Keel said. "A study 40 or 50 years ago didn't find any San Francisco garter snakes at all in that area."

"But it is a good habitat for them. And young snakes do tend to roam," Keel said.

Since the snake is an endangered species, protected under federal and state laws, the land on which they live also must be preserved.

"The discovery of the snake here may have a tremendous impact on future development along the coast," West-Bourke said. A live-trapping study is planned to estimate better how many of the snakes live at Rancho del Oso.

Most of the snakes live in small pockets scattered around San Mateo County, such as Ano Nuevo State Reserve and Pescadero marsh. The largest known population dwells in a pond just across from the San Francisco airport in

South San Francisco, according to McGinnis.

"We've been studying that population," he said. "It's so loud there that I could hardly talk to my graduate students above the roar of the airplanes. But the noise didn't seem to bother the snakes, probably because they don't have eardrums," he said.

McGinnis also studied the San Francisco garter snakes at Ano Nuevo. By using radio transmitters to track the snakes, they discovered that the reptiles spend the winter hibernating uphill from their ponds. This suggests that the San Francisco garter snake needs more than just a pond for preservation.

"It probably needs a small valley system," McGinnis said. That would include a shallow pond, meadowland, a drier bank, and lots of frogs.

It is unlikely that you will find a San Francisco garter snake sliding into your backyard, but if you do, the California Department of Fish and Game wants to hear about it. Call the area office in Monterey, 1-649-2870.

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