

Capsule on Species at Risk

Quebec's snakes

Quebec's snakes belong to the order Squamata, Serpentes suborder. Contrary to popular belief, snakes are neither glutinous nor harmful and there are no venomous species in Quebec, but they may bite in self-defence. Their flicking tongue does not sting either; it catches air molecules to transmit them to Jacobson's organ (situated in the roof of the mouth). The latter passes on the information to the brain and this informs the snake on its environment.

Quebec snakes are either oviparous or ovoviparous. They thus have two ways of giving birth to their offspring depending on their species. In the first instance, the females lay eggs in the environment. These eggs are semi-porous, which enables water and oxygen exchange with the environment. The eggs must be laid in warm and humid locations (e.g.: rotten wood). In the second instance, the eggs develop in the body of the female snake: they remain in the genital track until they hatch. This adaptation protects baby snakes against less than suitable climate conditions.

All Quebec snakes hibernate in hibernacula: holes between rocks, in the ground, in abandoned dens or any other place below the frost line in winter. Hibernacula can host several individuals of the same species or of different species that come back to their native hibernacula every winter. We must thus avoid destroying these habitats.

In Quebec, there are eight species distributed within three different families: *Natricidae*, *Colubridae* and *Xenodontidae*. Here is a table that shows the situation of the snake species in Quebec under federal and provincial legislations (the "x" represents the plight of the species):

Species	Act respecting threatened or vulnerable species (provincial)			Species at Risk Act (federal)			
	Vulnerable	Threatened	Likely to be designated as threatened or vulnerable	Extirpated	Endangered	Threatened	Special concern
Common garter snake							
Northern ribbon snake							x
Northern Water Snake			x				
Redbelly snake							
Brown snake			x				
Smooth greensnake							
Ringneck snake							
Milk snake			x				x



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The causes of threat to Quebec snakes are mostly due to habitat loss. Urban legends are also responsible for the death of several snakes. It is the case, among others, of the milk snake (erroneously referred to by French-speaking Quebecers as “serpent de lait”, which is a literal translation of their English name, instead of “couleuvre tachetée”) farmers found in barns. For a long time, farmers believed that they hanged on to cow udders to drink milk. In fact, the milk snake is the only constrictor in Quebec and it mainly feeds on small rodents (which are frequently found in barns).

As for the other non designated species, it is very easy to recreate artificially some of their habitats. Anything found in an open area exposed to sun that protects them from humidity (shingles, wooden boards, rocks, bricks, etc.) makes an excellent snake habitat. However, it is more difficult to recreate a hibernaculum, for snakes come back to the same place to hibernate year after year.

Brown snakes



Milk snake

