

THAMNOPHIS, PART I: THAMNOPHIS SIRTALIS PARIETALIS.

By: Jan van het Meer, Brakellaan 50, 1215 PK  
Hilversum, The Netherlands.

Contents: Introduction - Description - Food - The  
terrarium - Reproduction - The rearing  
of young - Conclusion.

## INTRODUCTION

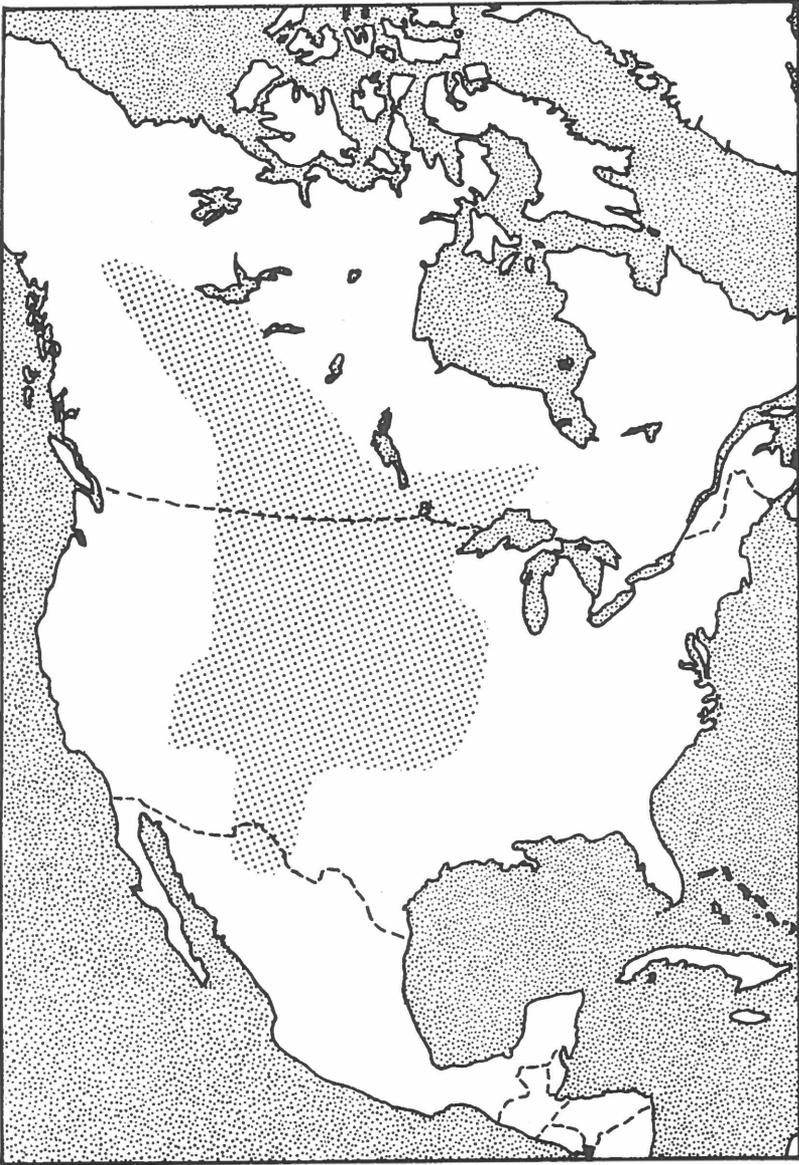
There has not yet been much written about *Thamnophis* in Litteratura Serpenti. It is unfortunate that these species get such limited attention. To redress the balance I wish to undertake a review, in the coming issues, of seven of the 48 species and subspecies that live in north and central America.

The following species will be dealt with in turn: *Thamnophis sirtalis parietalis*, *Thamnophis sirtalis similis*, *Thamnophis scuritus proximus*, *Thamnophis radix haydeni*, *Thamnophis radix butleri*, *Thamnophis radix brachystoma* and *Thamnophis cyrtopsis collaris*.

All the above mentioned species I have possessed or still have. Because my snakes are housed in more or less standardized terraria, you will discover only minimal differences in the description of distinct species. But I will not shorten distinct descriptions, so every article is complete without having to read the other articles.

## DISTRIBUTION

*Thamnophis sirtalis parietalis* is the most widely distributed *Thamnophis* subspecies. It appears on the east coast and in the south-east of British Columbia, in Alberta and bordering the extreme



Map 1. Distribution area of *Thamnophis sirtalis parietalis*.

south coast of Mackenzie, the coast of Saskatchewan and south Manitoba, south through the large plains to the border of Oklahoma and Texas (see map 1).

## DESCRIPTION

The females of *Thamnophis sirtalis parietalis* are in general larger than the males; the latter sex normally reaches a length of 70-90 cm, whilst females usually become significantly longer: from 100 to 135 cm..

Their colour is black. They are decorated with three gold-yellow or white-yellow stripes that are strongly developed; between the dorsal and side stripes they often have red or orange spots. The side stripe runs mainly over the second and third scale rows. Normally this species has seven upper labials. There are 19 rows of dorsal scales and the anal plate is not divided.

## FOOD

The food I give mainly consists of smelt, with a vitamin preparation (Carnicon or Gistocal) sprinkled over it. Beside this they sometimes get some whiting, but because not all *Thamnophis* will eat smelt, they sometimes get earthworms.

## THE TERRARIUM

The terrarium in which I keep this *Thamnophis* species measures 75x50x65 cm (lxbxh). For the complete length of the terrarium I have installed a fluorescent lamp for the light supply, with a lamp of 25 Watts as heat-source. This burns the whole day during the summer (about 15 hours). The temperature is, for the period April till the begin-

ning of September, at the hottest point 35-40°C or higher and at the lowest point in the terrarium about 25°C; at night the temperature sinks to about 20°C, almost roomtemperature.

During the winter months the heat-source is switched off. The temperature in the terrarium is then the same as in the room. In this way the snakes get a sort of winter rest. Last winter I gave them a winter period of three months in the refrigerator.

In the terrarium I have provided a water tank of 40 cm length, 15 cm breadth and 6 cm depth. As substrate I prefer peat-dust. Naturally a few branches are provided to climb in and the snakes can use cork-bark to hide under. At a height of 40 cm I screwed a shelf to the back-wall, to allow the snakes an area on which to 'sunbathe'.

The terrarium is planted with plastic plants. Real plants die very quickly in my experience, due to the high temperature in the terrarium and also due to the damage caused by the snakes climbing on them.

The water tank stands on a platform of about 25 cm height, to prevent pollution of the water with peat-dust by the snakes.

## REPRODUCTION

During his advances, the male tries to get on the back of the female and tries to twine his tail around that of the female. In this way he tries to push his cloaca against the females' cloaca to gain entrance with his hemipenis.

The copulation can take place on the ground, but it is also sometimes done in the branches. In the latter case it can happen that they both fall down and get separated from each other. Usually they then resume where they stopped and you can see them copulate in the course of the day or the

evening.

#### THE REARING OF YOUNG

As soon as the young come out off the egg-membrane they hide anywhere where it is possible. The number of young per birth is between 15 and 30. The young, that are between 13 and 23 cm long have to be separated from their parents, because sometimes when they remain in the same terrarium as the parents, they are looked upon as food and get eaten. As far as I know this has never happened to snakes in my care.

After a few days the young start to eat independently. Initially I give them smelt that is cut into little pieces, with Carnicon or Gistocal over it. Later they get whole smelts, also with a vitamin preparation on it. I have never had to force-feed the young.

#### CONCLUSION

The *Thamnophis sirtalis parietalis* specimens about which I have written here have already been in my possession for eight years. I still derive pleasure from them every day.

When you take good care of them, they can become rather large. Their length should not be underestimated: two of my females are between 130 and 135 cm long.

In the next article I will discuss *Thamnophis sirtalis similis*.

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Translation: Fons Sleijpen.