



## Common Gartersnake Preys on Fledgling Bullock's Oriole in the Creston Valley, British Columbia

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Common Gartersnake (*Thamnophis sirtalis*), one of British Columbia's most widely distributed reptiles, is mainly associated with aquatic habitats such as marshes, ponds, streams, rivers, and small lakes. The Valley Gartersnake (*T. s. fitchi*) is the subspecies commonly found throughout the interior of the province (Masuda et al. 2006).

The varied diet of the Common Gartersnake consists mainly of animals that include amphibians, earthworms, intertidal and freshwater fishes and their larvae, leeches, small birds, and small mammals. It

is the only snake in the province that eats the toxic amphibian Rough-skinned Newt (*Taricha granulosa*) (Gregory and Campbell 1984, St. John 2002, Masuda et al. 2006).

On 16 July 2011, while searching for nesting birds along a riparian strip of vegetation bordering Duck Creek in the Creston valley, British Columbia, I encountered a distressed Bullock's Oriole (*Icterus bullockii*) uttering alarm calls. Repeatedly, the oriole flew to one of several dead willow (*Salix* spp.) branches (Figure 1), perched briefly, then dropped down and hovered over the ground vegetation.

I was unable to determine the cause of the oriole's distress, so I repositioned my pick-up truck and climbed onto the roof to scan the ground below with binoculars. I immediately spotted a Common Gartersnake writhing about with a bob-tailed Bullock's Oriole fledgling in its jaws (Figure 2). This explained the behaviour of the distraught oriole. The snake was moving about a small area with dead branches, twigs, dry leaves, dry flattened grasses, and green forbs and appeared to be seeking a concealed place to carry or move its prey. However, the dead young oriole got snagged on fallen branches, forcing the snake to reverse direction and often lose its hold on the prey. This occurred several times. Once, when the snake released the oriole, I could see the breast was torn, exposing pink flesh. It also appeared the oriole had been struck in the face as there was an injury near the bill. About 40 minutes later, I walked into the area to have a closer look. I estimated the snake to be an adult, about 61cm (24 in) in length. It was in the process of swallowing its prey head first (Figure 2).



**Figure 1.** Bullock's Oriole alarm calling while a Common Gartersnake was preying on its offspring. Photo by Linda M. Damme, Creston, BC, 16 July 2011.



**Figure 2.** Common Gartersnake swallowing a fledgling Bullock's Oriole. *Photo by Linda M. Damme, Creston, BC, 16 July 2011.*

It is likely the fledgling Bullock's Oriole was attacked by the gartersnake while perched on a dead branch close to the ground as evidenced by an accumulation of fresh fecal bird droppings. Newly fledged Bullock's Orioles are commonly fed by the parents on or near the ground, making them more vulnerable to ground predators (Rising and Williams 1999; pers. obs.). Although the fledgling oriole was dead, the adult was still uttering alarm calls when I left the scene over an hour later.

Adult Bullock's Orioles are known to mob and attack potential predators and female Brown-headed Cowbirds (*Molothrus ater*), near their nest (Cottam 1943, Williams 1988, Neudorf and Sealy 1992) but I did not witness such behaviour from the parent. Predation of Bullock's Orioles is rarely observed and my encounter appears to be the first reported by a Common Gartersnake (Ernst and Ernst 2003). †

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#### **About the Author**

Linda actively records all aspects of natural history on her jaunts around the Creston valley where she resides.