

POSSIBLE SHARP-TAILED SNAKE OBSERVATION NEAR PARKSVILLE, BRITISH COLUMBIA

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The Sharp-tailed Snake (*Contia tenuis*) is a small, rarely seen, and secretive species that has a patchy distribution in British Columbia. It has only been recorded on seven Canadian Gulf Islands and at a few locations on extreme southern Vancouver Island (Matsuda et al. 2006). Field observations of this small snake are important to document as future investigations may reveal an additional disjunct population for the province.

On 23 May 2006, while visiting Rathrevor

Park, three kilometres south of Parksville, British Columbia, I observed what I think was Sharp-tailed Snake. During the four to five seconds I watched the snake it moved over a small loose gravel surface from the road edge into long grasses and brush. This occurred near the turn off into the #1 parking lot. I tried to grab the snake as it moved into the dense grasses but was not successful.

The snake was approximately 450 mm (17.7 in) long and very thick in comparison to a garter snake (*Thamnophis* spp.) giving it a short and fat appearance. The sharply pointed tail terminated the squat body and was very unlike any garter snake I have seen. The colour was uniformly dark grey with subtle red longitudinal stripes down the sides with no markings along the top of the body. The scales were very obvious and the snake moved quite fast. This sighting occurred within four to five m from marsh water and trees.

The general habitat in the immediate vicinity was forest edge with water and swampy brush between the road and the trees with a dense ground cover of grasses, wild roses (*Rosa nutkana*), and willows (*Salix* spp.). At this time there was an abundance of black slugs (*Arion ater*) and banana slugs (*Ariolimax columbianus*) out in the open, the principal food of the Sharp-tailed Snake (Darling 1947, Zweifel 1954).

When I returned home I compared my notes with other publications, including Gregory and Campbell (1996). In addition, over the past 50 years I have observed, handled, and photographed hundreds of garter snakes from around the province, and I am convinced (99%) that the animal was not a Common Garter Snake (*Thamnophis sirtalis*), Northwestern Garter Snake (*T. ordinoides*), or Western Garter Snake (*T. elegans*).

Literature Cited

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About the Author

Allen, now retired from a lifelong career in marine construction, has seriously been birdwatching for over 50 years, primarily on Vancouver Island and in the Lower Mainland region of British Columbia. He has written over 150 articles for local publications and has given many illustrated natural history lectures to conservation groups.

He has served on the executive of several natural history groups including Nature Canada and the British Columbia Waterfowl Society. Allen presently lives in Parksville, Vancouver Island, where the pace of birding is slower but he still remains active in data collection and wildlife surveys. Presently, he is President of the Oceanside Woodcarving Club and spends many hours carving birds, his favourite subject.
