

THAMNOPHIS ATRATUS (Aquatic Garter Snake).

PREDATION. On May 30, 2004, JD and KR were conducting amphibian surveys along a stretch of Bennett Creek in Mendocino National Forest, Tehama County, CA, USA (UTM Coordinates 531484 E, 4408974 N, Zone 10, NAD27, elevation 336 m). The weather was clear with a light breeze; air temperature was 28 C, and the creek temperature was 22. At about 1300 hr, two adult *Thamnophis atratus* found sitting on a wet rock immediately adjacent to a small waterfall in the creek. Both snakes were loosely coiled in a striking posture, and had their heads near the water. The snakes appeared to be intently watching the water. The snakes were observed for 10 minutes during which time both snakes were observed to strike at small fish as the fish attempted to swim up the waterfall. After one of the snakes was successful, it was captured with the fish still in its mouth. The fish was a California roach [*Lavinia symmetricus* (= *Hesperoleucus symmetricus*)]. The snake was 59.5 cm (SVL); the other snake was also captured and was 50.0 cm. A video recording was obtained along with photographs of one snake catching a fish.

Lind and Welsh (1994. *Animal Behavior*. 48:1261-1273) reported that *T. atratus* foraging techniques varied ontogenetically with juveniles (< 44.9 cm SVL) using both ambush and underwater substrate-crawling, and adults using underwater substrate-crawling almost exclusively. The snakes we observed were both adults, yet they were using an ambush style of foraging, something that Lind and Welsh found only once in 38 observations of adult *Thamnophis atratus* foraging.

Catching small fish as they ascended a small waterfall would require good visual acuity and a rapid strike. Alfaro (2002. *Functional Ecology*. 16:204-215) reported that *T. couchii* (= *T. atratus*) aerial strike speed was more than five times that of *T. sirtalis*. Drummond (1985. *Animal Behaviour*. 33:206-215) and Schaeffel and De Queiroz (1990. *Copeia* 1990:50-58) reported that the aquatic specialists *T. couchii* and *T. melanogaster* had superior vision compared with *T. sirtalis* and other *Thamnophis* with more terrestrial foraging modes. Both these factors would suggest that *T. atratus* would be particularly well adapted to the type of ambush foraging that we observed.

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