

# **COMMON KINGSLAKE CARE SHEET**

***(Lampropeltis getula ssp.)***

**\*\*For generalized, background information on snake care and husbandry, please see the "General Snake Care Sheet" first\*\***

Kingsnakes are a medium to large sized colubrid native to a broad area of North America as a species. Depending on subspecies, kingsnakes range from southern Canada, throughout most of the United States, and into Northern Mexico. Coloration and patterning also varies with subspecies, and can be banded, striped, blotched, speckled, or solid colored. Kingsnakes are well known for their tendencies to feed upon other snakes, including their own species and venomous snakes indigenous to the same area (such as rattlesnakes) on occasion. Despite this, Kingsnakes are among the most widely kept and bred snakes in the reptile industry and are available in many color morphs including striped phases, albinos, and hypos.

## **\*Overall Difficulty Level: Novice**

All of these Common Kingsnake subspecies have relatively simple, straightforward care requirements, making them suitable choices for the beginning reptile enthusiast provided they possess a general knowledge and understanding of reptile, specifically snake, husbandry. Given the proper care, king snakes can attain longevity of 15-25 years in captivity on average.

## **Size and Description**

Hatchling king snakes typically range from 7-12 inches in length. As adults, king snakes can range between three and six feet (or 36-72") depending on subspecies and locality. Kingsnakes are medium to large smooth scaled colubrids that can be quite variable in coloration and patterning depending on the particular subspecies and locality. Many subspecies are black, olive-brown, to dark brown in ground color with white to yellowish banding, rings, striping, dashes, dots, speckles, or spots. The Mexican black kings are solid black as adults. The head is indistinct from the neck in common kingsnakes.

Many different naturally occurring and designer color and pattern morphs of various species of kingsnakes (especially Florida and California Kings) have been bred and produced in captivity. These include various strains of Albinos, Hypos, Newport phases, Anerythristics, Dot-Dash Cal Kings, Banana Cal Kings, Lavenders, Axanthics, and Mendota phases to name a few.

## **Common Kingsnake Taxonomy**

**Kingdom:** Animalia

**Phylum:** Chordata

**Class:** Reptilia

**Order:** Squamata

**Suborder:** Serpentes

**Family:** Colubridae

**Subfamily:** Colubrinae

**Genus:** Lampropeltis

**Species Epithet:** *Lampropeltis getula*

## Common Kingsnake Subspecies

**Eastern Kingsnake** (*Lampropeltis getula getula*): A large subspecies occurring over much of the Eastern and Southeastern United States and can range up to six to seven feet (72-84"). Ground color is jet black, to brownish black with white to pale yellow "chain link" patterning.

**Florida/Brooks Kingsnake** (*Lampropeltis getula florida*): A medium to large subspecies reaching five to six feet (54-72"), occurring in parts of the Southeastern and Eastern United States. Ground color can vary from tannish, yellowish, olive yellow to brown with darker brown to olive brown dorsal blotches and flecking.

**Apalachicola/Blotched Kingsnake** (*Lampropeltis getula "goini"*): An often questioned subspecies of Kingsnake (often thought to be a variant of the Florida Kingsnake), occurring in the Florida panhandle. It can be variable in color and patterning, ranging from cream colored, pale yellow or tannish, brownish, or even reddish in color with large, darker irregular shaped blotches. Some specimens may exhibit striping or partial striping instead of blotches.

**California Kingsnake** (*Lampropeltis getula californidae*): A medium sized subspecies (three to five feet or 36-54") and perhaps the most widely kept and variable in color and patterning depending on phase and locality. Occurs in portions of western and Southwestern United States and northern Mexico. Ground color is typically black to chocolate brown with whitish, cream colored, to yellowish banded, striped, and dot-dash phases and varieties all being noted. Cal Kings are also available in high white or high yellow "banana" and other "designer" color phases.

**Desert Kingsnake** (*Lampropeltis getula splendida*): A medium sized subspecies ranging from three to five feet (36-54") and occurring in the Southwestern United States. Ground color can be cream colored to yellowish with numerous darker brown or black dorsal blotches and mottling. The head is frequently black or dark colored except for the labial scales.

**Mexican Black Kingsnake** (*Lampropeltis getula nigrita*): A small to medium sized subspecies (three to five feet or 36-54"), occurring in arid portions of the Sonoran desert in the Southwestern United States and Mexico. It is typically uniformly black or chocolate brown in color.

**Speckled Kingsnake** (*Lampropeltis getula holbrooki*): A small to medium subspecies (three to five feet or 36-54") that generally occurs in the central (and portions of Eastern) United States. Ground color can vary from cream colored, yellowish, brown, to olive brown with numerous fine darker speckling and/or dorsal blotching.

**Black Kingsnake** (*Lampropeltis getula niger*): Not to be confused with the Mexican Black kingsnake, this subspecies occurs within the eastern United States, and has a olive brown, chocolate brown, to black ground color with cream colored to yellowish bands and speckles that tend to be fainter than those seen on the Speckled King.

## Temperament and Handling

King snakes, like many species of snake, are often initially more defensive as hatchlings or juveniles. They may gape and hiss, rattle their tails, musk/defecate, and attempt to bite in response to what they perceive as a potential threat (you handling them). With patience and

gentle handling, most common king snakes will become more tolerant of handling and can be worked with more easily. Normally, adult king snakes are docile snakes that are reluctant to bite and are easily handled. It should be kept in mind however that even a supposedly docile snake may bite or react defensively if suddenly startled or frightened or when food is detected (resulting in a feeding response bite).

### **Enclosure/Housing**

The enclosure you choose must be secure to prevent the escape of the inhabitant and provide adequate ventilation. This is especially so with kingsnakes and milksnakes, which seem to be very adept escape artists. Hatchling to juvenile kingsnakes can be maintained in a 10-15 gallon long glass terrarium with a secure screen top. Larger numbers of hatchling to juvenile kings can be kept in commercially available rack systems consisting of appropriately sized plastic shoe box sized containers with holes punched or melted for ventilation. These containers are made by Iris, Rubbermaid, and Sterilite. Racks are usually heated with Flexwatt heat tape either installed along the back wall of the rack as back heat or on the rear half of the floor of each slot as belly heat, and should be monitored with a quality thermostat.

Most adult King snakes can be maintained in a 20-30 gallon long glass terrarium or similar sized commercially available plastic, wooden, melamine, or PVC enclosure with front opening sliding or hinged acrylic or glass doors if one chooses. Adults can also be kept in commercially available rack systems consisting of appropriate sized sweater to blanket box sized containers (28-32 quart, 41 quart, or similar sized depending on the size of the snake), as previously described.

A hide-box for allowing the snake to retreat from view is recommended as part of a terrarium setup as well. Besides commercially available hide boxes, you could modify many things to serve as a hide box. They can include opaque plastic storage container, plastic litter pans for cats, and inverted flowerpots for example. A water dish should also be provided within the enclosure and be changed at least once weekly or sooner if fouled. The dish should be heavy enough so that it isn't easily tipped over (plastic or ceramic crock dishes work well). It should also be cleaned and disinfected periodically.

### **Temperature and Heating**

As with all reptiles, kingsnakes are ectothermic animals, meaning it is important to provide them with an external heat source and thermal gradient for proper digestion and gestation. There should be a warm side and a cooler side to the enclosure. To create the warm side, you can use an under tank heater (UTH), Flexwatt heat tape, or a radiant heat panel on one half of the enclosure. Some commercially available plastic and PVC enclosures and racks come with their own heating elements. The warm side should remain around 85-90 degrees Fahrenheit. It is also important to disallow any snake to come into direct contact with any heating element, as thermal burns can result, and can sometimes be severe, requiring professional veterinary attention. UV or other overhead lighting is not required for most species of snakes, particularly primarily nocturnal species such as king snakes. However, overhead UV lighting or fluorescent lighting can improve the cage's aesthetics as well as visibility within.

## **Substrate**

The substrate is the enclosure's bedding. Newspaper, commercially available cage liner material, cypress mulch, aspen shavings or Sani Chips are all acceptable substrates for common kingsnakes. Avoid pine and cedar shavings, as these substrates are toxic to snakes. The substrate should be kept dry and be spot cleaned when needed to reduce the likelihood of bacterial outbreaks. A complete substrate change and replacement should be done periodically as well, with that interval depending on the substrate being used.

## **Feeding and Diet**

Common kingsnakes are nonvenomous constrictors, although they may simply seize and ingest small prey items without constriction. They will feed on rodents and other small mammals, small birds and bird's eggs, lizards, and the occasional amphibian in the wild, and are perhaps best known for their tendency to prey upon other snakes, even the venomous species that share their range.

Most hatchling king snakes in captivity can be started off two to three times weekly on pinkie mice or fuzzy mice. On occasion, some neonate or juvenile king snakes may be fussier eaters and may initially accept only lizard prey items. In these cases, if one wishes to switch the snake over to rodents, various scenting techniques may need to be performed. In some cases, mixing the rodent prey item within a bag of the preferred prey item will work. Other scenting options that are available can include splitting or "braining" the pre killed food item to entice the snake to feed. The size of the prey item should be increased accordingly as the snake grows. A general rule of thumb to follow is to offer prey items that are no larger than the widest point of the snake. Adult King snakes can be offered adult mice to small adult rats every five to seven days. It is important to not to overfeed snakes, since obesity and compromised health of the snake can result over time.

## **Summary**

The common kingsnakes have long been a widespread and popular pet snake species to maintain and propagate within the herpetocultural hobby and industry, particularly the Florida Kingsnake (*L. getula floridana*), Eastern Kingsnake (*L. getula getula*), and the California Kingsnake (*L. getula californidae*). These three subspecies, along with many of the others, have maintained steady popularity over the years due to their typically straightforward care requirements, as well as to the many colorful and attractive naturally occurring variations among localities and subspecies, and even "designer" color phases and morphs produced in captivity on a regular basis.