

NORTH AMERICAN MILK SNAKE CARE SHEET

(*Lampropeltis triangulum* ssp.)

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

Milksnakes are a medium to large sized colubrid native to a very large area of North America as a species. Depending on subspecies, milksnakes range from southern Canada, throughout most of the United States, and into Northern Mexico, and Central America (such as Pueblos and Honduras). Many species of Milksnake possess aposematic warning coloration bearing close resemblance to North American coral snakes. The rule of thumb, applying to North American species, is that "if red touches black, friend of jack". "If red touches yellow, you're a dead fellow". Milksnakes derive their name from the erroneous belief they enter barns to drink the milk of cows from their utters. In reality, milksnakes are frequently found around barns and other human habitations since these areas provide both shelter and food in the form of rodents for the snakes.

Size and Description

Hatchling milk snakes typically range from 5-10 inches in length. As adults, milk snakes can range anywhere between two and six feet (or 24-72") depending on the subspecies and locality. Milksnakes are a small to large smooth scaled colubrid, with many species and subspecies bearing resemblance to the coral snakes (genus *Micrurus*). Many such species possess alternating red, black, and yellow (or white) banding that varies in width among many of the subspecies and localities. Many of the tri colored varieties of milk snake can be distinguished from the North American coral snakes only by the presence of the red bands bordering the black bands (whereas the red bands border yellow or white bands on the N.A. species of Coral snakes). Some other subspecies can be jet black as adults, while others such as Reds and Easterns have a whitish, tan, or cream colored background color with large red, reddish brown, or brown dorsal blotches bordered in black. The Eastern milk snake often has a pale "V" or "Y" shaped marking on the back of the neck. In most Milksnake species, the head is indistinct from the neck.

Many different color and pattern morphs of various species of milksnakes have been bred and produced in captivity. These include Albinos of many species, Tangerine phases, "Apricot", "Oreo", and "Halloween" Pueblan phases, Axanthics, Anerythistics, and Hypos to name a few.

Milk snake Taxonomy

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Suborder: Serpentes

Family: Colubridae

Subfamily: Colubrinae

Genus: *Lampropeltis*

Species Epithet: *Lampropeltis triangulum*

Commonly Kept Milksnake Subspecies

Eastern Milksnake (*Lampropeltis triangulum triangulum*): This small to medium sized species (24-36") occurs over much of the Eastern United States and Southeastern Canada. As juveniles, they have a whitish to cream colored ground color with bright red blotches. Adults are usually tannish brown to grayish in color with reddish brown blotches bordered with black. The belly is checkered black and white. The **Red Milksnake** (*Lampropeltis triangulum sypshila*) is similar but often retains bright red blotches as an adult.

Nelson's Milksnake (*Lampropeltis triangulum nelson*): Ranges from 30-42" on average, and occurs in southern Guanajuato, Mexico to the Pacific coast. It is a tri colored subspecies with 13-18 wide red rings, and noticeably narrower black and yellow bands. The head is mostly black except for a lighter mottled snout.

Sinaloan Milksnake (*Lampropeltis triangulum sinaloae*): Ranges from 30-42" on average, and occurs in southwestern Sonora, Sinaloa, and Chihuahua Mexico. A tri colored subspecies that can easily be distinguished from others by its narrow black and yellow/white bands considerably interspaced by extremely wide red bands.

Honduran Milksnake (*Lampropeltis triangulum hondurensis*): A large and robust subspecies that can range up to five to six feet, or 60-72". It is another tri colored subspecies with distinct red, black, and yellow bands, and is characterized by its distinct orange "chevron" pattern on the snout. It also occurs in "Tangerine" phases where the yellow bands are replaced by orange.

Mexican Milksnake (*Lampropeltis triangulum annulata*): A small to medium sized subspecies that ranges from 24-30" on average, and occurs in Northeastern Mexico in Coahuila, Tamaulipas, and Nuevo León. It is a typical tri colored subspecies with evenly spaced red, black, and yellow bands.

Pueblan Milksnake (*Lampropeltis triangulum campbelli*): A medium sized subspecies ranging from 24-48". This subspecies occurs in Puebla, eastern Morelos, and northern Oaxaca, Mexico. This tri colored subspecies had relatively wide red, black, AND white bands as well as a relatively small, blunt dark colored head. Also commonly occurs and is propagated in "Tangerine" "Oreo", "Halloween" and "Apricot" phases.

Black Milksnake (*Lampropeltis triangulum gageae*): A large subspecies, ranging from four to 6 feet (or 48-72"), sometimes reaching up to seven feet. It occurs in Costa Rica and Panama, and appears as a fairly typical tri colored subspecies (with red, black, and white bands as hatchlings and juveniles. Adults typically change to a uniformly jet black coloration.

*Overall Difficulty Level: Novice

Most of the North American milksnake subspecies that are commonly kept species, have relatively simple, straightforward care requirements, making them suitable choices for the beginning reptile enthusiast. Although some subspecies or variants may remain somewhat nervous and flighty (thus less tolerant of excessive handling), provided that a general knowledge and understanding of reptile, specifically snake, husbandry is had, most milk snakes will do quite well overall in captivity. Given the proper care, milk snakes can attain longevity of 15-25 years on average in captivity.

Temperament and Handling

Milk snakes, like many species of snake, are often initially more defensive as hatchlings or juveniles. They may rattle their tails, musk and defecate, and attempt to bite in response to what they perceive as a potential threat (you handling them). This especially seems to be the case with many of the Mexican and Central American tri colored milksnakes. While colorful, many of the tricolors tend to remain somewhat nervous and flighty snakes. With patience and gentle handling though, most milk snakes will settle down considerably and be more tolerant of handling and less likely to bite. 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 milksnakes can be maintained in a 10-15 gallon long glass terrarium with a secure screen top. Larger numbers of hatchling to juvenile milks can be kept in commercially available rack systems consisting of appropriately sized plastic shoe box sized containers with holes punched or melted in for ventilation. These containers are made by Iris, Rubbermaid, and Sterilite. Racks are usually heated with Flexwatt heat tape, and should be monitored with a quality thermostat.

Most adult Milk 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 glass or acrylic doors if one chooses. These types of enclosures provide increased security for snakes within them and space can be better utilized with them since they are stackable, and it is relatively easy to control temperature and humidity within them. Many of these types of enclosures also are available with built in lighting and heating elements. 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, milk snakes 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. Many 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 milk snakes.

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 milk snakes. 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

As with kingsnakes, milksnakes are nonvenomous constrictors, although they may simply seize and ingest smaller prey items without the use of constriction. Milk snakes will consume a variety of prey items depending on its availability including rodents and other small mammals, small birds and bird's eggs, lizards, amphibians, and occasional smaller snakes.

Most species of neonate milk snakes can be started off in captivity two to three times weekly on pinkie mice or fuzzie mice. 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 milk snakes can be offered adult mice every five to seven days. It is important to not to overfeed your milk snake, since obesity and compromised health of the snake can result over time. On occasion, some neonate or juvenile milk snakes may be fussier eaters and may initially accept only lizard or small snake 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 may not be for the weak of stomach however, and can include splitting or "braining" the food item.

Summary

North American milksnakes have long been a widespread and popular pet snake species to maintain and propagate within the herpetocultural hobby and industry, particularly the tri colored subspecies and localities such as the *campbelli*, *hondurensis*, *sinaloae*, and *nelsoni*. Despite their sometimes nervous and flighty nature, these 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.