



*\*Photo Credit: Naturalista Colombia-INaturalist*

## Central American Ratsnakes/Nightsnakes (*Elaphe/Pseudelaphe flavirufus*)

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### **Checkered and Charming!**

Also known as the Yellow Eyed Ratsnakes, Central American or Mexican “Nightsnakes”, or the Tamaulipan Ratsnakes, the Central American ratsnakes are a lesser known genus of approximately five subspecies of relatively small to medium sized, primarily terrestrial and nocturnal to crepuscular colubrid snakes indigenous to Mexico. More specifically, they occupy the Gulf of Mexico, to the Coastal plains and lowlands of Mexico from Tamaulipas to the vicinity of Campeche. As with other somewhat closely related “ratsnakes”, these species of Mexican nightsnakes are secretive snakes that are primarily nocturnal to crepuscular, although they are also capable of climbing well in search of rodents and other small mammals, small birds, and other small reptiles or amphibians. These snakes can typically be identified by their somewhat elongated heads ranging in color from reddish to orangish with heavy, darker markings, and bluish to greenish-gray irises. Body ground color can range from yellowish to tan or cream colored, to light grayish or silver or pinkish with a series of alternating dorsal and lateral brick reddish to darker brown blotches bordered with black. Central American nightsnakes are a unique and underrated species of snake in which at least two of the five recognized subspecies have made their way into herpetoculture, and which can make for very colorful and intriguing snakes for the somewhat more intermediate enthusiast or pet owner.

### **Taxonomy**

**Life:** All living, physical, and animate entities

**Domain:** Eukaryota

**Kingdom:** Animalia

**Phylum/Sub Phylum:** Chordata/Vertebrata

**Class:** Reptilia

**Order:** Squamata

**Suborder:** Serpentes

**Infraorder:** Alethinophidia

**Family:** Colubridae

**Subfamily:** Colubrinae

**Genus:** *Elaphe/Pseudelaphe*

**Species:** *Elaphe/Pseudelaphe flavirufus*\*

*\*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

### **Lifespan and Longevity**

If provided the proper care, Mexican nightsnakes have the potential to attain longevity of at least 15 to 25 years or more in captivity.

### **Distribution and Habitat**

Range, habitat, and distribution of this genus of Central American “nightsnakes”, or ratsnakes may vary somewhat depending on the exact subspecies. However, the nominate subspecies, *Elaphe f. flavirus*, occurs in the Gulf of Mexico and Coastal plains, to the lowlands of Mexico from Tamaulipas to the vicinity of Campeche. The other commonly available subspecies, *Elaphe f. pardalina*, is found on the Caribbean Gulf Coast of Belize, and Guatemala, to Honduras and Nicaragua. Within this range, these secretive and somewhat fossorial species can be found in a variety of arid or semi-arid to moist habitats, from lowland areas, scrublands, shrublands, and coastal regions, to farmlands, agricultural or cultivated areas, or more moist tropical forests.

### **Origin/History**

*Pseudelaphe flavirufa* (Cope, 1867).

Unfortunately, there does not seem to be much information as to the history of these snakes in herpetoculture, although they probably have been kept since at least the 1990’s or so.

### **Experience Level Required**

Intermediate/Moderate.

### **Size**

As hatchlings and neonates, Mexican nightsnakes may range from about 5 to 11 inches, and up to 4 to 5 feet as typical adults, or about 48 to 60 inches.

### **Housing and Enclosure**

***Enclosure System: Primarily Terrestrial to Semi-Fossorial.*** Housing must be sealed, secure, and escape proof. Hatchling Mexican nightsnakes can be housed in a 10 gallon terrarium or enclosure. Adult Mexican nightsnakes should be housed in a minimum of a 20 to 40 gallon long terrarium or enclosure. These snakes may climb if provided the opportunity, but floor space is more important than height. Provide a substrate that can enable burrowing or hiding such as fine aspen shavings, forest bark, cypress mulch, or coconut fibers. Do not use pine or cedar shavings, as these substrates are toxic to snakes. Provide additional basking and hiding opportunities using live or artificial foliage, rocks, logs, driftwood, or other hides. Also be sure to include a sturdy water bowl or dish as well.

### **Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity**

Create a thermal gradient (or a warm side) in the cage/enclosure with an appropriate sized UTH (or tank heating pad), ceramic or radiant heat emitter, or incandescent, UVA/UVB, or other heat producing bulb. Ideal temperatures for Mexican nightsnakes range from 75 to 80 degrees F on the cool side and 80 to 85 degrees F on the warm side. Most species of snakes have fairly simple and undemanding heating and lighting requirements in captivity, and do not require additional UVA/UVB lighting, although providing it can be greatly beneficial for their health, immune system, and overall wellness. Also be sure to spot clean the enclosure for urates, feces, or uneaten food at least once per week. Be sure to periodically replace the substrate, clean, and disinfect the enclosure and its furnishings at minimum every 2 to 3 months. More specific lighting, heating, and humidity product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one’s needs, as well as those of one’s animals can be given as well. These snakes should be maintained at relatively moderate relative humidity levels, from about 40 to 50%, with additional humid hides or retreats to assist with shedding and overall health.

## **Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition**

***Carnivorous***; In the wild, Mexican nightsnakes are carnivorous, and will prey upon rodents and other small mammals, small birds, bird eggs, and other smaller vertebrates such as smaller amphibians and reptiles. Hatchlings and juveniles may also initially prefer smaller frogs, lizards, or other reptiles. In captivity, Mexican nightsnakes can be given feeder rodents of appropriate size, such as rats or mice or supplemented with small, appropriately designated feeder lizards or frogs for pickier eaters. In most circumstances, it is recommended to provide humanely pre-killed rodents acquired from a reputable source, as offering live rodents to any snake can carry risk of serious injury or even death to your snake when the rodent bites to defend itself or otherwise gnaws on your animal. A general rule of thumb when selecting feeder rodent sizes for your snake is to provide prey items that are approximately the same width as the snake's widest point. It should also be noted that many snakes may refuse food for longer periods of time over several weeks or months, especially in the fall and winter months or if several other husbandry conditions are not being met. While this can be alarming to new pet owners, it is oftentimes normal, but their overall health and weight should be monitored during these times to make sure they do not lose weight or otherwise deteriorate. Most snakes typically are fed whole prey items, and do not usually require additional calcium or vitamin D3 supplementation unless otherwise directed. Their feeding frequency will also depend on the age, size, and overall health of your animal. Use care as to not overfeed them, as obesity and other health related issues can become an issue. More specific dietary and supplementary product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one's needs, as well as those of one's animals can be given as well.

## **Handling**

As with many snakes, hatchling and juvenile Mexican nightsnakes may initially be nervous and defensive. These snakes may rattle their tails, musk or defecate, or attempt to strike or bite when alarmed or threatened. Handle your Mexican nightsnake gently and deliberately, but do not drop or injure the animal. Mexican nightsnakes can generally be somewhat faster moving and nervous species of snakes, and while not overly flighty or willing to bite in most cases, are better suited for intermediate level handling and understanding of snake behavior.

**\*\*Also be sure to practice basic cleanliness and hygiene associated with proper husbandry after touching or handling any animals or animal enclosures to prevent the possibility of contracting salmonellosis or any other zoonotic pathogens\*\***

## **Contact**

Authored by Eric Roscoe. For any additional questions, comments, and/or concerns regarding this animal, group of animals, or this care sheet, please email and contact:

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