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*Photo Credit: Tar River Reptiles

Gray Banded Kingsnake (*Lampropeltis alterna*)

Variable Kingsnake (*Lampropeltis thayeri*)

Herpetoculture Classics

The gray banded and variable kingsnakes are two species of similar, fairly secretive and nocturnal species of kingsnakes with docile dispositions, and a pioneering track record in herpetoculture and pet keeping. Indeed, the gray banded kingsnake was among the first colubrids, and snakes in general, to be successfully and widely bred in captivity, with brumation and other husbandry techniques being learned from this species. Several different phases and localities occur, ranging in ground color of gray or bluish gray with wide reddish orange bands edged in black. The thayeri kingsnake is much more variable in color and pattern, with multiple phases, hence their common name of “variable” kingsnake. Both of these secretive and crepuscular kingsnake species tend to be quite mild mannered overall, and make for excellent pets for the novice to 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: Lampropeltis

Species: *Lampropeltis thayeri** and *Lampropeltis alterna**

*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

Lifespan and Longevity

If provided the proper care, gray banded and variable king snakes can attain longevity of 15 to 25 years or more.

Distribution and Habitat

The gray banded kingsnake is a relatively small to medium sized, terrestrial species of colubrid snake indigenous to the southwestern United States and into northern Mexico, where it occupies Chihuahua, Coahuila, western Nuevo Leon, Durango, and northern Zacatecas, depending on the subspecies. The similar Mexican, or variable kingsnake is indigenous to portions of northern to northwestern Mexico, where they are found in the Mexican states of San Luis Potosi, southern Durango, northern Jalisco, and Nuevo Leon, also depending upon the subspecies. Within this range, gray banded and Mexican kingsnakes occupy primarily terrestrial environments, including semiarid, to semi-humid desert or semi-desert flats, rocky hillsides, valleys, and canyons, and montane areas, as well as rocky, dry, open forests and woodlands, and grasslands. Mexican and gray banded kingsnakes are a somewhat secretive group of species, often seeking refuge in burrows, rocks and rock crevices, hollowed logs, and other natural or manmade debris on or near the ground.

Origin/History

Lampropeltis alterna (A.E. Brown, 1901); Lampropeltis mexicana (Garman, 1884).

Both the gray banded kingsnake and the Mexican, or “Thayeri”/variable kingsnakes have become well established in herpetoculture for the past several decades, since at least the 1970’s. Gray banded kingsnakes were first kept by reptile enthusiasts in the mid-1950s; however, it would not be until the 1970’s that they would be bred in captivity. The gray banded kingsnake, or “alterna” as it is known, was one of the first and earliest colubrid snake species to be successfully brumated in captivity during this time by U.S. colubrid breeder Rob Applegate. This fine-tuned the ways and techniques for captive-breeding and herpetoculture for the decades to come. Even to this day, “alterna” retains a strong following of keepers, as these kingsnakes have proven to be docile, and relatively easily kept and bred in captivity.

While specific localities often continue to also be a strong focus when it comes to the breeding of these snakes, some cross-breeding with related Lampropeltis species has also taken place.

Experience Level Required

Novice/Beginner to Intermediate/Moderate.

Size

Gray banded and variable kingsnakes range from 5 to 10 inches as hatchlings, and 2 to 4 feet, or 24 to 48 inches on average as most adults.

Housing and Enclosure

Enclosure System: Primarily Terrestrial. Housing must be sealed, secure, and escape proof. Hatchling gray banded and variable kingsnakes can be housed in a 10 to 15 gallon terrarium or enclosure. Adult gray banded and variable kingsnakes should be housed in a minimum of a 20 to 40 gallon long terrarium or enclosure. Gray banded and variable kingsnakes are primarily terrestrial, and floor space is more important than height. Provide a substrate that can enable burrowing or hiding such as fine aspen shavings, 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 gray banded and variable kingsnakes range from 75 to 80 degrees F on the cool side and 80 to 88 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. Gray banded and variable kingsnakes should be maintained at relatively low to moderate relative humidity levels, which may vary somewhat depending on the species and subspecies, from about 40 to 60%, with additional humid hides or retreats to assist with shedding and overall health.

Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition

Carnivorous; In the wild, gray banded and variable kingsnakes are carnivorous, and will prey upon rodents and other small mammals, small birds, small lizards, bird eggs, and other smaller vertebrates. Hatchlings and juveniles will also occasionally eat smaller frogs, lizards, or other reptiles. Gray banded and variable kingsnakes also sometimes known for overpowering and consuming other snakes species that share their ranges, including venomous species. In captivity, gray banded and variable kingsnakes can be given feeder rodents of appropriate size, such as rats or mice, although some may require scenting. 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 king snakes may initially be nervous and defensive. King snakes may rattle their tails, musk or defecate, or bite when alarmed. Handle your king snake gently and deliberately, but do not drop or injure the animal. The gray banded and thayeri kingsnakes overall tend to be inoffensive snakes with regular handling.

****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

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Disclaimer: Note that the information provided in these, or any care sheets, are not intended to be all-exhaustive, and further research and care should always be sought and provided when it comes to any species one may prospectively be interested in. These care sheets are also not intended to serve as substitutes for professional veterinary medical care and husbandry should any animal require it.

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