



\*Sandi Bingham



\*Photo Credit: Zoo New England

## Milk Snakes (*Lampropeltis triangulum*) (*Lampropeltis elapsoides*) (*Lampropeltis abnorma*) [*Lampropeltis annulata*], [*Lampropeltis micropholis*] [*Lampropeltis gentilis*] and [*Lampropeltis polyzona* ssp.]

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### Harmless, Tri-Colored Mimics

Milksnakes are medium sized to large North American colubrid snakes that commonly derive their name from the erroneous belief that they drink milk from cows when they actually inhabit barns and other outbuildings for refuge and for hunting rodents. Milk snakes are variable in color depending on species; many are tricolored with red, black, and white (or yellow) bands that oftentimes resembles the venomous coral snake. Other species have reddish brown blotches bordered in black on a cream to light brown colored background and a black & white checkered belly. When threatened, milk snakes may employ a variety of defensive behaviors including rapidly vibrating their tails, coiling and striking, or displaying their bright, aposematic coloration as a potential warning to predators while using spastic or irregular movements to further startle or confuse the threat. Some may also hide their heads while displaying their colors as well. Many species of milk snakes, particularly the tri-colored species, have long been staples in the pet trade, and are hardy, prolific, and beautiful snakes with basic and undemanding care requirements that are sure to catch nearly anyone's attention.

### 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 triangulum*\*, *Lampropeltis elapsoides*\*, \**Lampropeltis gentilis*,

\**Lampropeltis micropholis*, *Lampropeltis annulata*, *Lampropeltis abnorma*, and *Lampropeltis polyzona*\*

**Subspecies:** *Lampropeltis polyzona* ssp.

\*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

## **Lifespan and Longevity**

If provided the proper care, milk snakes can attain longevity of 15 to 25 years or more in captivity.

## **Distribution and Habitat**

Depending on the species, milk snakes range over much of the United States, southern Canada, northern Mexico and Central America. A more detailed breakdown of the ranges of the most popular species are as follows:

- Eastern Milksnake (*Lampropeltis triangulum*): Much of southern to southeastern Canada, through the Midwestern, eastern, and northeastern United States.
- Red Milksnake (*Lampropeltis triangulum*, formerly *syssila*): North-central, to central, and south-central U.S.
- Pueblan Milksnake (*Lampropeltis polyzona campbelli*): Southern Puebla, eastern Morelos, and northern Oaxaca.
- Mexican Milksnake (*Lampropeltis annulata*): Northeastern Mexico in the Coahuila, Tamaulipas, and Nuevo Leon, as far north as southwestern Texas in the U.S.
- Nelson's Milksnake (*Lampropeltis polyzona nelsoni*): Mexico from southern Guanajuato, and central Jalisco, to the Pacific Coast of Mexico.
- Black Milksnake (*Lampropeltis micropholis*): Costa Rica and Panama in Central America.
- Honduran Milksnake (*Lampropeltis abnormal hondurensis*): Honduras, Nicaragua, and Northeastern Costa Rica.
- Sinaloan Milksnake (*Lampropeltis polyzona sinaloae*): States of Sonora, Sinaloa and Chihuahua in Mexico.
- Central Plains/Western Milksnake (*Lampropeltis gentilis*): South Central and Central United States.

Depending on their geographic location, milk snakes can be found a variety of habitats including arid to semi-arid deserts and scrubland, grasslands, prairies, fields & meadows, agricultural and residential areas, deciduous forests and woodlands, swamplands, marshes, and margins of wetlands.

## **Origin/History**

*Lampropeltis triangulum* (Lacépède, 1788). The *Lampropeltis triangulum* complex was first described by Bernard Germain de Lacépède in 1788; however the many subspecies would be described by other authors at other times.

Milksnakes have long been a popularly kept group of pet snake species, as far back as at least the 1950's or 1960's. Several of the tri-colored Mexican and Central American subspecies would be the most popularly kept, including the Mexican, Honduran, Pueblan, Nelson's, and Sinaloan milksnakes. Albinos/amelanistics, as well as several other color mutations of these species would also be produced. Hardy and readily adaptable to breeding in captivity, milksnakes saw their peak along with other North American colubrids during the 1990's. While they continue to remain somewhat readily available, the rise of the ball python by the 2000's certainly contributed to the lessening of the North American colubrid stronghold earlier in the 90's.

## **Experience Level Required**

Novice/Beginner.

## **Size**

Milk snakes range from 5 to 10 inches as hatchlings, and 2 to 5 feet, or 24 to 54 inches as most adults. Some species and localities can reach up to 6 feet, or 72 inches.

## **Housing and Enclosure**

***Enclosure System: Primarily Terrestrial.*** Housing must be sealed, secure, and escape proof. Hatchling milk snakes can be housed in a 10 gallon terrarium or enclosure. Adult milk snakes should be housed in a minimum of a 20 to 40 gallon long terrarium or enclosure. Milk snakes 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 milk snakes 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. Milk snakes should be maintained at relatively moderate relative humidity levels, which may vary somewhat depending on the species and subspecies, from about 30 to 60%, with additional humid hides or retreats to assist with shedding and overall health.

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

***Carnivorous;*** In the wild, milk snakes are carnivorous, and will prey upon rodents and other small mammals, small birds, bird eggs, and other smaller vertebrates. Hatchlings and juveniles will also occasionally eat smaller frogs, lizards, or other reptiles. Milk snakes also sometimes known for overpowering and consuming other snakes species that share their ranges, including venomous species. In captivity, milk snakes can be given feeder rodents of appropriate size, such as rats or mice. 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 milk snakes may initially be nervous and defensive. They may rattle their tails, musk or defecate, or bite when alarmed. Handle your milk snake

gently and deliberately, but do not drop or injure the animal. Many milk snakes will become more tolerant and accustomed to handling as they become older, but may still be active and flighty species.

**\*\*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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