



\*Photo Credit: Travis W. Taggart



\*Photo Credit: Daniel Thompson

## Prairie and Mole Kingsnakes (*Lampropeltis calligaster*), (*Lampropeltis rhombomaculata*) and (*Lampropeltis occipitolineata*)

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### Anything But Mundane

Prairie kingsnakes are relatively small to medium sized colubrids with a ground color of light to dark brown, reddish brown, or olive brown with three rows of darker brown to reddish alternating blotches. Blotches and patterning often become considerably less conspicuous on adult specimens. Some specimens may also be striped. Prairie and mole kingsnakes are nocturnal to crepuscular depending upon conditions, and are fairly secretive snakes, although when threatened, can rapidly vibrate their tails to create a buzzing sound similar to a rattlesnake, expel foul smelling musk, and/or attempt to bite in defense. Kingsnakes derive their common names from their well-known habit of consuming other snake species, including indigenous venomous snakes. Recently, there have been three (3) separate species have been described: *L. calligaster* found west of the Mississippi River, *L. rhombomaculata* east of the Mississippi River, and *L. occipitolineata* in south Florida.

### 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 calligaster*\*, *Lampropeltis rhombomaculata*\*, and *Lampropeltis occipitolineata*\*

\*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

### Lifespan and Longevity

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

### Distribution and Habitat

The prairie and mole kingsnakes are a group of secretive, medium sized to large, primarily terrestrial colubrid snakes indigenous to portions of the eastern half of the United States. More

specifically, the prairie kingsnake occupies the central to south-central Great Plains states, and portions of the Midwestern U.S., while the mole kingsnake occupies further east, east-central, and southeast in the U.S. Within these ranges, prairie and mole kingsnakes occupy primarily terrestrial environments, including open to semi-open fields, prairies, grasslands, agricultural and cultivated areas, and open forests, woodlands, and forest edges with dry soils, most often near permanent to semi-permanent wetlands or other bodies of water. Mole and prairie 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 calligaster* (Harlan, 1827); *Lampropeltis rhombomaculata* (Holbrook, 1840).

Prairie and mole kingsnakes have no specific history in herpetoculture or the pet trade, as they would be kept and bred in captivity for many decades, since at least the 1960's or 1970's.

### **Experience Level Required**

Novice/Beginner.

### **Size**

Prairie and mole kingsnakes range from about 5 to 10 inches as hatchlings, and 3 to 5 feet on average, or 36 to 54 inches as most adults.

### **Housing and Enclosure**

***Enclosure System: Primarily Terrestrial.*** Housing must be sealed, secure, and escape proof. Hatchling prairie and mole kingsnakes can be housed in a 10 to 15 gallon terrarium or enclosure. Adult prairie and mole kingsnakes should be housed in a minimum of a 20 to 40 gallon long terrarium or enclosure. Prairie and mole 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 prairie and mole 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. Prairie and mole kingsnakes should be maintained at relatively 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, prairie and mole kingsnakes 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. Prairie and mole kingsnakes also sometimes known for overpowering and consuming other snakes species that share their ranges, including venomous species. In captivity, prairie and mole kingsnakes 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 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. They 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. Most prairie and mole king snakes will become more docile and tolerant and accustomed to handling as they become older.

**\*\*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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