



\*Keith Hilson

## Common Kingsnakes (*Lampropeltis* sp.)

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### King Sized Diversity

Common kingsnakes are a medium to large sized, robustly built colubrid that can vary considerably in color and pattern depending on the species. Ground color can be black, brown, grayish, tan, or yellowish with speckles, blotches, bands, striping, or chain link patterns depending on the species. Kingsnakes derive their common names from their well-known habit of consuming other snake species, including indigenous venomous snakes, which they have developed immunity to, and subdue and overpower by constriction. Most of the common kingsnake species 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.

### Species

Species include the California Kingsnake (*Lampropeltis californiae*), Florida Kingsnake (*Lampropeltis floridana*), Brook's Kingsnake (*Lampropeltis brooksi*), Eastern or Chain Kingsnake (*Lampropeltis getula*), Apalachicola Kingsnake (*Lampropeltis meansi*, formerly *goini*), Speckled Kingsnake (*Lampropeltis holbrooki*), Mexican Black Kingsnake (*Lampropeltis nigrita*), and Desert Kingsnake (*Lampropeltis splendida*).

### 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 californiae*\*, *Lampropeltis floridana*\*, *Lampropeltis brooksi*\*, *Lampropeltis getula*\*, *Lampropeltis meansi*\*, *Lampropeltis holbrooki*\*, *Lampropeltis nigrita*\*, and *Lampropeltis splendida*\*

\*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

## **Lifespan and Longevity**

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

## **Distribution and Habitat**

Depending on the species, common kingsnakes range over much of the United States, southern Canada, and into northern Mexico. They may be found in a variety of habitats depending on their geographic location, including arid to semi-arid deserts and scrublands, grasslands, prairies, fields and meadows, deciduous forests, swamplands, and wetland margins.

## **Conservation Status**

IUCN Red List Least Concern (LC).

## **Experience Level Required**

Novice/Beginner.

## **Size**

Common kingsnakes can range from 5 to 10 inches as hatchlings, and 2 to 5 feet, or 24 to 54 inches as most adults depending on the species. Some of the larger species can reach up to 6 feet, or 72 inches.

## **Housing and Enclosure**

Housing must be sealed, secure, and escape proof. Hatchling common kingsnakes can be housed in a 10 to 15 gallon terrarium or enclosure. Adult common kingsnakes should be housed in a minimum of a 20 to 40 gallon long terrarium or enclosure. Common kingsnakes are primarily terrestrial, and floor space is more important than height. Provide a substrate that can enable burrowing or hiding such as cage carpet or cage liner, 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 common king 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.

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

***Carnivorous;*** In the wild, common 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. Kingsnakes are well-known for overpowering and consuming other snakes species that share their ranges, including venomous species. In captivity, common 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.

### **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. Many king snakes will become more 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**

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 the Madison Area Herpetological Society at [info@madisonherps.org](mailto:info@madisonherps.org)

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