



\*Mike Day

# Gray Banded Kingsnake (*Lampropeltis alterna*)

## Variable Kingsnake (*Lampropeltis thayeri*)

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### 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

Gray banded kingsnakes are indigenous to the Trans Pecos and Chihuahuan deserts, semi-deserts, and scrublands of southwestern United States. The Variable Kingsnake occurs in the

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eastern mountain ranges and plateaus of Mexico.

### **Conservation Status**

IUCN Red List Least Concern (LC).

### **Legal and Regulatory Status(\*Subject to Change)**

Consult with your local, municipal, and state ordinances and regulations for any ownership restrictions.

### **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**

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 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 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.

### **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, 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

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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**

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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