

MEXICAN KINGSNAKE CARE SHEET

(Lampropeltis mexicana ssp.)

****For generalized, background information on snake care and husbandry, please see the "General Snake Care Sheet" first****

The Mexican kingsnake is a medium sized colubrid native to various portions of Mexico, depending on the subspecies described below. This secretive and somewhat fossorial species occupies primarily the deserts and other dry, arid regions of these areas. These nocturnal snakes feed primarily on frogs, lizards, and small rodents in the wild. Mexican kingsnakes can exhibit a wide array of natural colors and patterns, known as polymorphism, giving at least one of the subspecies its common name of "Variable Kingsnake".

Mexican Kingsnake Taxonomy

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Suborder: Serpentes

Family: Colubridae

Subfamily: Colubrinae

Genus: Lampropeltis

Species Epithet: *Lampropeltis mexicana*

Mexican Kingsnake Subspecies

Mexican Kingsnake (*Lampropeltis mexicana mexicana*)

Greer's or Durango Kingsnake (*Lampropeltis mexicana greeri*)

Thayer's or Variable Kingsnake (*Lampropeltis mexicana thayeri*)

***Overall Difficulty Level: Novice**

The Mexican kingsnakes have relatively simple, straightforward care requirements and a docile inoffensive disposition, making them suitable choices for the beginning reptile enthusiast provided they possess a general knowledge and understanding of reptile, specifically snake husbandry and if a well established captive born snake is selected. Hatchlings and juveniles may require lizard scented prey from time to time, but given the proper care, these king snakes can attain longevity of 15-25 years in captivity on average.

Size and Description

Hatchling Mexican king snakes typically range from six to nine inches in length. As adults, they average between approximately two and three feet (or 24-40"). Coloration can be quite variable,

with a ground color being clean to mottled gray, tan, light to dark orangish-red, or cream colored. There are often red to reddish orange saddle or bow tie shaped dorsal blotches, saddles, and/or flecks bordered in black. Some phases of the Variable kingsnake (*Lampropeltis mexicana thayeri*) resemble other tri colored king and milk snakes in that they have red, black, and white banding that closely resembles coloration of the North American coral snakes (*Micrurus sp.*). Melanistic, or solid black Thayeri are also seen on occasion.

Temperament and Handling

Mexican King snakes, like many species of snake, may often be initially more defensive as hatchlings or juveniles. They may rattle their tails, musk and defecate, and attempt to bite in response to what they perceive as a potential threat (you handling them). With patience and gentle handling, your most Mexican kings will become more tolerant of handling and can be worked with more easily. Normally, most adults though are mild mannered and inoffensive snakes that are reluctant to bite and are easily handled. It should be kept in mind however that even a supposedly docile snake may bite or react defensively if suddenly startled or frightened or when food is detected (resulting in a feeding response bite).

Enclosure/Housing

The enclosure you choose must be secure to prevent the escape of the inhabitant and provide adequate ventilation. This is especially so with kingsnakes and milksnakes, which seem to be very adept escape artists. Hatchling to juvenile kingsnakes can be maintained in a 10-15 gallon long glass terrarium with a secure screen top. Larger numbers of hatchling to juvenile Mexican kings can be kept in commercially available rack systems consisting of appropriately sized plastic shoe box sized containers with holes punched or melted in for ventilation. These containers are made by Iris, Rubbermaid, and Sterilite. Racks are usually heated with Flexwatt heat tape either installed along the back wall of the rack as back heat or on the rear half of the floor of each slot as belly heat, and should be monitored with a quality thermostat.

Most adults can be maintained in a 20-30 gallon long glass terrarium or similar sized commercially available plastic, wooden, melamine, or PVC enclosure with front opening sliding or hinged acrylic or glass doors if one chooses. These types of enclosures provide increased security for snakes within them and space can be better utilized with them since they are stackable. Temperature and humidity are also relatively easy to control in these cages, and most are available with built in lighting and heating elements. Adults can also be kept in commercially available rack systems consisting of appropriate sized sweater to blanket box sized containers (28-32 quart, 41 quart, or similar sized depending on the size of the snake), as previously described.

A hide-box for allowing the snake to retreat from view is recommended as part of a terrarium setup as well. Besides commercially available hide boxes, you could modify many things to

serve as a hide box. They can include opaque plastic storage container, plastic litter pans for cats, and inverted flowerpots for example. A water dish should also be provided within the enclosure and be changed at least once weekly or sooner if fouled. The dish should be heavy enough so that it isn't easily tipped over (plastic or ceramic crock dishes work well). It should also be cleaned and disinfected periodically.

Temperature and Heating

As with all reptiles, Mexican kingsnakes are ectothermic animals, meaning it is important to provide them with an external heat source and thermal gradient for proper digestion and gestation. There should be a warm side and a cooler side to the enclosure. To create the warm side, you can use an under tank heater (UTH), Flexwatt heat tape, or a radiant heat panel on one half of the enclosure. Many commercially available plastic and PVC enclosures and racks come with their own heating elements. The warm side should remain around 86-90 degrees Fahrenheit. It is also important to disallow any snake to come into direct contact with any heating element, as thermal burns can result, and can sometimes be severe, requiring professional veterinary attention. UV or other overhead lighting is not required for most species of snakes, particularly primarily nocturnal species such as Mexican king snakes.

Substrate

The substrate is the enclosure's bedding. Newspaper, commercially available cage liner material, cypress mulch, or aspen shavings, or Sani Chips are all acceptable substrates for Mexican kingsnakes. Avoid pine and cedar shavings, as these substrates are toxic to snakes. The substrate should be kept dry and be spot cleaned when needed to reduce the likelihood of bacterial outbreaks. A complete substrate change and replacement should be done periodically as well, with that interval depending on the substrate being used.

Feeding and Diet

As with other kingsnakes, Mexican kingsnakes are nonvenomous constrictors, although they may simply grab and ingest smaller prey without constriction. In their native ranges, Mexican kingsnakes will consume primarily rodents and other small mammals, lizards, and the occasional amphibian.

Many hatchling Mexican Kings will initially require lizard scented prey items until they can be switched over to unscented frozen thawed rodents. Hatchling snakes should be fed two to three times weekly on pinkie mice to fuzzy mice. In these cases of finicky eaters, if one wishes to switch the snake over to rodents, various scenting techniques may need to be performed. In some cases, mixing the rodent prey item within a bag of the preferred prey item (often lizards) will work. Other scenting options that are available may not be for the weak of stomach however. These can include splitting, or "braining" the food item. The size of the prey item should be increased accordingly as the snake grows. A general rule of thumb to follow is to offer prey items that are no larger than the widest point of the snake. Adult Mexican king snakes can

usually be offered adult mice every five to seven days. It is important to not to overfeed snakes, since obesity and compromised health of the snake can result over time.

Summary

All three subspecies of the Mexican Kingsnakes, with the *Thayeri* subspecies being perhaps the most widely kept and variable in coloration, seem to have maintained a steady popularity and following in the herpetocultural hobby over the years due to such color variations, as well as continued interest, demand, and focus on the keeping and propagation of specific locality animals, as is the case with many other colubrids. Despite the occasional choosy feeding hatchling or juvenile, Mexican kings overall remain a fairly popular choice among colubrid enthusiasts, and tend to remain at relatively small and manageable sizes as adults.