

Arizona or Sonoran Mountain Kingsnake

(*Lampropeltis pyromelana* ssp.)

Native Range:

The Sonoran Mountain Kingsnake (*Lampropeltis pyromelana*) is found in several disjunct populations in the mountains of Utah, Arizona, extreme south western New Mexico, and adjacent areas of northern Mexico. Three subspecies are currently recognized, with a fourth subspecies (*L. p. woodini*) recently being synonymised with the nominate form. This last form is still maintained in pure lineage by many hobbyists. Currently accepted subspecies include:

- *L. p. pyromelana* (Arizona Mtn. Kingsnake)
- *L. p. infralabialis* (Utah Mtn. Kingsnake)
- *L. p. knoblochi* (Chihuahua or Tarahumara Mtn. Kingsnake)
- *L. p. pyromelana* var. '*woodini*' (Huachuca Mtn. Kingsnake)

Size:

6-7" at hatching, adult may exceed three feet, but most are smaller.

Handling:

These snakes will rarely attempt to bite, although they may do so if restrained. Handle gently, without pinching or squeezing, allowing the snake to move through your fingers. Do not allow the snake to dangle unsupported.

Caging:

Any 'typical' snake cage can be used, with a fifteen-gallon aquarium being adequate for an adult. Hatchlings are sensitive to dehydration and do best in small 'Critter Keeper' cages or plastic shoe boxes. Due their secretive nature, be sure to provide adequate hiding areas. Rock cracks and crevices are preferred over larger, more spacious hide houses. Many keepers use small shallow pottery (plant pot drainage saucers) successfully.

Substrate:

A variety of substrates can be used. Aspen bedding, newspaper, and Care Fresh are popular with many keepers. Paper towels may be used for lining baby cages. Keep the substrate clean and dry at all times. As with all reptiles, do NOT use cedar or pine shavings. These items are toxic to reptiles.

Food:

Hatchling Arizona Mtn. Kingsnakes have a reputation for being difficult feeders. In truth, they are easy feeders, we just offer them the wrong food. Frequently, a stubborn hatchling will require a pinkie scented with lizard smell (Skinks or Fence Lizards [*Sceloporus* sp.] seem to work best) before accepting it. More rarely, it will refuse anything but the lizard itself. After a few lizards, it will usually begin to feed on 'scented' pinkies, and then on to plain ones. Convincing a tiny hatchling to accept a pinkie mouse sometimes requires great patience. Once hatchlings begin accepting pinkie mice, they should be fed about every seven days. Increase the size of the meal as the snake grows. One or two juvenile mice are

sufficient every ten or fourteen days to maintain even the largest adult. Often, these very stubborn feeders may be placed into hibernation for six to eight weeks. Upon removal, they often feed voraciously! After several generations of captive breeding, these feeding problems have for the most part disappeared, the result of careful selection to eliminate the trait.

Humidity & Water:

Provide clean water in a small dish. Humidity should be kept low, or respiratory problems can result. Due to the variance in cages and home environments, some snakes may experience shedding problems, particularly the tail tip. If this is noticed, provide a small plastic container with lid (cut an access hole in the side) filled with damp sphagnum moss. This will allow the animal to shed properly. Stuck sheds may harden and constrict the blood flow to the tail, causing loss of the tail tip. Many shedding problems can be rectified if noticed quickly simply by placing the snake in a small deli cup overnight with a wet paper towel. Place the cup in a suitable location in the cage.

Heating & Lighting:

Provide a thermal gradient by placing a heat pad under one end of the cage. This should allow the snake to choose from higher temperatures (about 80°F) at the warm end, and cooler temperatures (about 70F) at the cooler end. Provide suitable hiding areas at both warm and cool areas, so the snake can feel secure at any temperature. Temperatures below 65°F should be avoided. No special lighting is required for these animals. Many specimens will refuse food during the winter months, an indication that they wish to hibernate. These specimens may be kept at 50-55°F for two to three months and will resume feeding when returned to warmer temperatures.

Reproduction:

Although examining the shape of the tail can sometimes determine sex, many adult snakes can only be accurately sexed by 'probing'. Hatchlings can be sexed by manually everting the hemipenes (a process known as 'popping'). Probing or popping should only be performed by an experienced individual, as improper technique may result in severe damage or even death. A brumation (hibernation) period of about three months at 50-55°F is generally required to induce breeding. Typical clutches consist of three to five eggs. Incubation takes from 55 to 60 days, at an average temperature of 80F.

Colour and Pattern Phases:

Due to the confusion among herpetologists over the status of the many subspecies, breeders are attempting to maintain genetically pure strains from known localities. It is likely that the subspecies will change in the very near future, and only snakes with known locality records will then be accepted as specimens of a given subspecies. Try to maintain pure specimens where possible, and identify 'generics' as such. Several genetic mutations of this species are present in captive collections, including hypomelanistic, albinistic, anerythritic, and the unusual 'Applegate' strain. Some may be hybridized from crosses with *L. ruthveni*.

Note:

Due to the limited genetic material present in captive collections, many specimens of *L. p. knoblochi* exhibit spinal deformities, particularly at mid-body. Use caution in selecting specimens and attempt to select breeders from separate bloodlines to avoid this problem with your hatchlings.