

California Kingsnake

(Lampropeltis getula californiae)

Native Range:

The California Kingsnake (*L. g. californiae*) is found in the south western United States, from California eastward to Arizona. They are common in a variety of habitats, and are frequently caught and kept as pets by local youngsters. With attractive patterns and very easy care, they are fast becoming a pet industry mainstay.

Size:

Approximately eight to ten inches long at birth, they average three to four feet in length as adults. Occasional specimens may attain nearly five feet in length.

Handling:

These snakes 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 to twenty gallon aquarium being adequate for an adult. Hatchlings are sensitive to dehydration and do best in small 'Critter Keeper' cages or plastic shoe boxes.

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:

Most California Kingsnakes will be fed a diet of mice throughout their lives. Hatchlings usually feed readily on newborn 'pinkie' mice, and should be fed about every five to seven days. Increase the size of the meal as the snake grows. One or two adult mice are sufficient every ten or fourteen days to maintain even the largest adult. Often, hatchlings feel 'lost' or insecure when placed in a large cage. These animals will often feed readily if left overnight in a small deli cup with a pinkie and a folded paper towel to hide under.

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 90-95F) at the warm end, and cooler temperatures (about 78-83F) 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 75F should be avoided. No special lighting is required for these nocturnal animals.

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. Most specimens will require brumation (hibernation) to breed, but some will readily reproduce under normal conditions. Typical clutches consist of 10-15 eggs, although clutches of over 20 are recorded. Incubation takes from 55 to 60 days, at an average temperature of 81F.

Colour and Pattern Phases:

Throughout most of their range, California Kingsnakes are boldly banded in dark brown and creamy white or yellow. So-called 'Desert Phase' animals are coloured a very high contrast black and white, with breeders selecting for solid blacks and purest whites. In scattered locations, these animals may lack all traces of bands, instead possessing a full length light mid-dorsal stripe about two scales wide. Various combinations of these two patterns are known, and are very common in captivity. Melanistic specimens are available, and these turn nearly solid black as adults. At least two strains of amelanistic albinos are present in captivity, and all of these traits have been combined by breeders to create a veritable smorgasbord of colour and pattern combinations. Additionally, many breeders are attempting to maintain pure specimens representative of various localities. Many of these geographic localities have characteristic traits that are well worth preserving genetically.