

## King and Milk Snake Care Sheet

Kingsnakes are a type of colubrid snake that are members of the *Lampropeltis* genus, which also includes the milk snake. The majority of kingsnakes have quite vibrant patterns on their skin. The most popular kingsnakes in the reptile keeping hobby include the California kingsnake (*Lampropeltis getula californiae*), and grey-banded kingsnake (*Lampropeltis alterna*), among others. The most popular milksnakes include the pueblan (*L. t. campbelli*), the sinaloan (*L. t. sinaloae*), and the honduran (*L. t. hondurensis*). They use constriction to kill their prey and tend to be opportunistic when it comes to their diet; they will eat other snakes, lizards, rodents, birds, and eggs. Kingsnakes are commonly kept as pets, due to their ease of care. They are overall hardy and simple to care for. Kingsnakes are generally docile, curious and gentle and seem to enjoy being handled. They also seemed to be mesmerized by patterns flashing on a television. There are many subspecies of kingsnakes and will on average grow to around 4-6 feet in length and will live for approximately 12-17 years

They are a nocturnal species but you will see them awake and very active during the day time and evening especially in the summer. They can be a very fast snake when young but with regular handling will soon calm down and slow down a lot more. Kingsnakes can be very food oriented though so if not fed they will strike at you and once offering food they will want more.

### Housing

Kingsnakes and Milk Snakes come in a variety of sizes, so a cage can be chosen according to the adult size of the snake, although smaller cages can obviously be used when the animal is growing, smaller cages for young snakes are in fact a better choice, as they can become stressed if given too much space. The vivarium should allow a minimum of 1 square foot of floor space to each foot of snake and be approximately a third of the snake's length in height. Hatchlings should start out in appropriately sized plastic boxes / faunariums as they can become stressed in a large environment and stop feeding. Make sure your vivarium has a tight fitting lid.

### Heating

King Snakes are cold blooded and get their heat from their surroundings. In the wild snakes bask in the sun to keep warm or move to shady spot if they are too hot. The ideal temperature for your snake's vivarium is a temperature gradient of 84-88 F on the warm side and 70-75 F on the cool side. Heat should be provided using either a heat mat with thermostat or a heat bulb on the roof of the vivarium. Heat mats should only cover between a third and half of the floor space to allow your snake to thermo regulate. A thermostat set to the correct temperature is a **MUST** otherwise you risk the chances of your snake being burned. If providing heat via a heat bulb make sure you place a cage of the light, otherwise the snake may get too close, or wrap themselves round the bulb, again burning themselves. A dimming thermostat should also be used to control the heat in the enclosure, the most popular being the dimming Habistat. Failing to provide this could result in the enclosure becoming too hot which can potentially be fatal for your snake.

## Hides

All King Snakes need somewhere to hide and may become stressed if this is not provided. This could be something as simple as a cardboard box, toilet roll holder etc, which can easily be replaced when soiled. Hides can also be purchased from pet shops and online. Any hide provided should be just large enough for your King Snake to curl up in: too small and your king may not be able to get in, too big and they will not feel secure and can become stressed.

## Feeding

King Snakes feed on Rodents appropriate to the size of their mouth. (Mice, Rats, Chicks and even hamsters and gerbils are available as food items) Hatchlings will start in small mice (pinkies) once a week until eventually an adult will be eating a large mouse or rat every 7-10 days. Very large snakes may even require 2 adult rodents per feed. The general rule is to move the food along in 'threes' when you feel your baby King is still hungry after 1 pinkie, offer them 2, when you feel they are still hungry with 2 offer them 3, when they are bigger and 3 does not seem enough put them onto 1 'fuzzy' then 2 and 3 and so on until they are on the big mice and rats. DO NOT feed your snake live food, even if they appear to be off their food. If your snake is not hungry the mouse WILL try to defend itself, possibly injuring your snake, and leaving permanent scars.

Never handle your snake straight after a feed, as it may regurgitate its food –which is not at all pleasant for starters! Snakes that are preparing to shed will rarely feed until after the shed is complete.

## Shedding

King snakes shed their skin at regular intervals as they grow (also known as 'sloughing'). As they get older, the time between each shed will decrease. 7-10 days before the skin is shed the old skin will appear grey and dull and the eyes will appear to be glazed or 'milky'. The eyes then clear again and within a couple of days the shed begins. During this period your snake's eyesight will be a lot worse than normal and this may cause him to strike out in a nervous reaction. It is good practice not to handle snakes during the shedding process. The old skin is rubbed against a solid object such as a branch by the snake, and the skin peels off from the nose end. The skin should come off in one piece as the snake wiggles forward. Snakes may also wish to soak themselves in water during this period and you should ensure a water bowl is large enough for the snake's body to be fully submerged. Any dead areas of old skin that are allowed to remain can cause problems, if you notice any left behind, use a cotton wool bud soaked in warm water to try and gently pull the remaining skin off. You should not attempt to pull un-shed skin from the eye caps and should seek professional help if this happens. After shedding is complete you will probably find your snake is very hungry.