

King Snake Care

By Stephen Richardson

Lampropeltis getula californiae

Lampropeltis getula nigrita

Lampropeltis getula splendida

Introduction

King snakes are possibly the easiest snake to maintain in captivity. They have great appetites, they can handle temperature fluctuations, and do well in most substrates. All of my field experience is with the California King Snake (*Lampropeltis getula californiae*). I have found California Kings in several of the mountain ranges in southern California, in the Sonoran and Mojave Deserts, and in coastal areas. Most of the Cal kings I have photographed in the wild were found just before sunset or during all hours of the night. Often on my way home from teaching night classes, I will catch a Cal king crossing the road. I have a field herping policy of catching, photographing, and releasing. King snakes have variable patterns and come in a variety of colorations, making them some of the most fascinating snakes to keep and breed in captivity. The adult size of the snakes on this care sheet range from about 2.5 to 4.5 feet. Other species of king snakes, namely the Eastern Chain King, can exceed 6 feet.

Caging and Substrate

King snakes are ophiophagus which means that are snake eaters. Consequently, king snakes should be kept alone in their enclosure. I keep all my king snakes in a rack system with under the belly heat cord. Any escape proof cage made for reptiles should work well for king snakes. Use aspen chips for substrate and place a heat pad made for reptiles on one side of the cage. Do not use cedar for substrate, it can harm your snake. The best substrate for most snakes is aspen. The heat pad should be adhered to the outside bottom of one side of the cage to maintain a thermal gradient. Snakes are ectothermic so they need to be able to move within their enclosure to thermal regulate. Place a water dish on the cool side of the cage and a hiding place on both the cool and warm side of the enclosure. Keep your snake's drinking water fresh and disinfect the water dish often. I change substrate for kings about once a month and spot clean often.

Feeding

I suggest that king snakes be fed in a feeding tub where the snake is removed from its cage and placed in the tub where its food is waiting for it. King snakes in

captivity can develop a strong feeding response, they often strike at any movement. The feeding response can be minimized by handling your snake often and using a feeding tub. King snakes are particularly sensitive to smells. If you handle another snake and then pick up your king, then it may decide to try to eat your hand. I recommend that you wash your hands before you handle your king snake. If you find yourself in the predicament of having a king snake latched on to your hand or finger, then place your hand and snake under some cold running tap water. After some time they usually decide to let you go.

I feed kings roughly once a week, although hatchling kings usually have no problem with being fed twice a week. I feed my kings frozen thawed mice or hopper rats. I thaw out my frozen feeder rodent and dry it off before I offer it to the snake. Whenever possible, captive snakes should be fed frozen thawed food; this is the most ethical choice with the added benefit of being the safer choice for your snake.

Common Husbandry Challenges

Ophiophagus

King snakes are snake eaters, thus do not keep a king snake with any other snake. In some of my many hiking adventures I have come upon king snakes eating other snakes; keeping a snake with a king snake in captivity just facilitates this behavior. Further, I have observed many kings bite themselves during feeding time, the smell of food and their own movement is just too much to handle. This is generally not a problem, the snake usually realizes it made a mistake and lets itself go. This behavior does give you, the king snake keeper, a sense of how strong the feeding response can become. There have been multiple cases of baby kings consuming themselves tail first until they end up in a tight circle. I have seen this occur in my neonates once. I simply gently pulled the snake's body out of its mouth. This suggests that you should stick around to see what your baby king does after you have fed it.

Going Off of Feed

When the temperature in your neighborhood drops during the fall and winter your king snake may quit eating. This is not a problem; simply give your snake two weeks to clear its digestive tract and unplug the heat pad and keep your snake cool for two to three months. This is normal behavior for most North American snakes and, in fact, it is healthy for your king snake to brumate for some time. Simply keep their water dish clean with fresh water and monitor the health of your snake during brumation. When your local temperatures start increasing, bring your snake's cage back up to temperature and resume feeding your snake.

Retained Shed

All snakes shed their skin. A healthy shed should roll off a snake's body in one piece. If a snake has pieces of shed stuck to its body, or it has eye caps, then you will have to soak it in warm water. I use a *Sterilite* container with a locking lid and air holes to soak my snakes. After about 10 to 15 minutes soaking in roughly 82° water, you can gently rub off any retained shed or eye caps with your finger. I cannot remember any cases of retained shed on my adult kings; however, I have had to help some baby kings shed. As long as you keep your king snake healthy with a clean cage and fresh water to drink, then your snake should never have any problems shedding.

Mites

Any pet snake should be handled often to keep it accustomed to human contact and to observe the overall health of the snake. If you notice small black or dark brown dots on your hands after holding your snake, then your snake has mites. Mites are a result of poor husbandry and possibly exposure to other reptiles with mites. Mites can spread from one snake's enclosure to the next fairly quickly. If you handle a snake with mites and then handle another, then both snakes will end up with mites. Mites can be removed easily by soaking your snake and using a product by *Natural Chemistry* called *Reptile Relief*. The product can be sprayed on your king snake, do not spray on their eyes, until it drips and then gently slide your hands along the snake and you will both feel and see the dead mites come off your snake. Follow the recommendations on the bottle. After treating a snake I wash them off with warm water and let them soak in clean warm water to make sure there is no more product on their body. You may need to treat a snake multiple times. Additionally, the snake's cage should be cleaned and sprayed with *Reptile Relief*. If left on your snake mites can lead to major health problems. You should have a sense of urgency if you notice mites on your herps.

Conclusion

Snakes from the genus *Lampropeltis* are truly amazing. They are tough, beautiful, and come in a variety of colors and patterns. King snakes have succeeded in inhabiting most of our continent; they are an important part of the ecology of where they live. Keeping king snakes is fun and rewarding as long as you keep your snake's cage clean, give it fresh water, and plenty of food energy. Remember, your snake is entirely reliant on you for all its health needs. If you are diligent and do not neglect your king snake's needs, then it will thrive for many years.