



California Kingsnakes

Lampropeltis californiae

BEGINNER • 3–4 FT ADULT • 15–20 YR LIFESPAN • TERRESTRIAL • WESTERN US & MEXICO

If the ball python is the classic first snake, the California kingsnake is the one for keepers who want the animal to do something. They're bold, active colubrids from the deserts and scrub of the western states and Mexico, and they eat with an enthusiasm that borders on comedy. The honest headline is what that appetite includes: other snakes. A king is a king, and it lives alone. Always.

AT A GLANCE	
Difficulty	Beginner
Ambient temps	75–85 °F (68–75 °F night)
Basking spot	85–90 °F
Humidity	40–60%
UVB	Low UVB beneficial
Diet	Carnivore: mice
Feeding cadence	Every 7–10 days
Adult size	3–4 feet
Lifespan	15–20 years



Captive-bred California kingsnakes fill breeder tables at every NARBC show, one of the hobby's classic beginner colubrids.

Photo: Squamata55 / iNaturalist · CC BY

01

Temperament & Handling

Kings are confident snakes. They're out and moving where a ball python would sit in a hide, and that boldness makes them satisfying to keep and easy to observe. Hatchlings can be defensive: expect musking, a rattling tail tip, and the odd nip. Most of that fades with routine, gentle handling. The bigger risk is food drive. Use a hook or a paper towel tube to lift the snake out, so the lid opening never becomes a dinner bell.

02

Housing: Space and Security

Think floor plan, not height. Kings are ground snakes that patrol, so length and width beat inches of climbing room; the table below is the Habitat-OS baseline by stage. Two things matter more than the numbers. First, the lid: a king will find any gap it can get its head through, then press until the rest follows. Second, **one kingsnake per enclosure, at every age**. These snakes eat other snakes, and they don't make an exception for a cagemate.

STAGE	MINIMUM	PREFERRED	NOTES
Hatchling	16×8×8	20×12×12	Strong feeding response; often takes its first meal within days.
Juvenile	20×12×12	24×18×12	Ophiophagous: never house with another snake, at any age.
Subadult	36×18×12	48×18×18	Genuinely active; give floor space to explore, not just a bigger box.
Adult	48×24×18	48×24×18	Hardy and active. 4×2 ft floor minimum; hides at both warm and cool ends.

Enclosure sizes in inches, from Habitat-OS life-stage guidance. Bigger is fine; smaller is not.

03

Heat & Light

Run the gradient down the length of the enclosure, not across it: 75–85 °F ambient, a basking surface of 85–90 °F at the warm end, and a night drop to 68–75 °F. Every heat source goes on a thermostat, with no exceptions and no heat rocks; kings press flat against warmth and will burn themselves on one. Low UVB isn't mandatory for a colubrid, but it is beneficial. A low-output tube over the warm half, on a regular day and night cycle, costs little and is simple to run.

04

Humidity & Water

This is the easy part, and the part people overcomplicate. Kings come from arid desert and dry scrub, so 40–60% relative humidity is the goal, and most rooms hit it on their own. A large, heavy water bowl the snake can curl up in covers drinking, the odd soak, and any humidity you need. Change it for clean water every couple of days. Damp, poorly ventilated setups are what invite scale rot and respiratory infection; when you're unsure, drier with good airflow wins.

05

Substrate & Furnishing

Aspen shavings, cypress mulch, or a coco-husk blend all work; pick one that holds a burrow, because kings dig. Skip loose sand, especially for hatchlings, which can pack it into the gut along with a meal. Furnishing is where new keepers get lazy. A king wants at least two hides, one over the warm end and one over the cool, so it never has to choose between the right temperature and feeling safe. Add cork bark, a sturdy branch, and leaf litter to break up the floor.

06

Feeding

Kings are enthusiastic feeders, which is most of why they're recommended to beginners. Appropriately sized frozen/thawed mice, every 7–10 days, from hatchling to adult; a meal roughly the width of the snake at its thickest point. In the wild they also take lizards and other snakes, and they shrug off rattlesnake venom, which tells you how seriously to take that appetite. A king that smells food will bite first and sort it out later, so wash your hands before the lid comes off.

07

Health Red Flags

Regurgitation is the one that should scare you: a king that throws up a meal has usually been handled too soon after eating or kept too cold. Let it rest, fix the gradient, then offer something small. Watch too for mites (black specks in the water bowl), stuck shed on the eyes or tail tip, and any wheeze or open-mouth breathing. Weigh the snake monthly. A second regurgitation, or a refusing and thinning king, is a reptile-vet visit, not a waiting game.

Husbandry data: Habitat-OS species library. Structure follows the NARBC show handout series. Every animal is an individual — when in doubt, ask the breeder at the table or a reptile veterinarian.