Grey-banded kingsnake
_Lampropeltis alterna_
Fact Sheet

**Status:** Common (endangered in New Mexico)

**Distribution:** Northern Mexico, Southeastern Texas, and Southeastern New Mexico

**Habitat:** Arid, semi-humid climates such as desert flats, canyons, and mountain areas

**Diet:** Lizards, snakes, and small rodents

**Length:** typically around 3 feet

**Weight:** around 200 g

Reproduction: In the spring, 30 days after breeding, the female kingsnake lays a clutch of 4 to 13 eggs.

**Longevity:** Up to 20 years

**General Description:** These snakes have wide gray stripes alternating with narrower black stripes. The black stripes are outline in white. Sometimes they also have red stripes within their black stripes.

**Behavior:** This snake is nocturnal and solitary by nature.

**Did you know?** You can tell that these snakes are non-venomous because their pupils are rounded rather than a vertical slit in shape.

**Where can you find them?** In zoos, popular pets, and in their natural habitat

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Grey banded Kingsnake

The gray-banded kingsnake is one of the most popular kingsnakes to be kept in captivity, and yet still very often misunderstood. Once thought to be extremely rare and limited in range, this brilliantly colored snake is actually fairly abundant in most parts of its range in Texas and Mexico. However, as a New Mexican native, this is a rare find.

*Lampropeltis alterna* (Brown, 1901) was first discovered in the Davis Mountains of Texas. Undoubtedly due to the wide range of colors and patterns found in this snake, there has been quite a bit of confusion over the taxonomy. Various authors have named it a subspecies or synonym of *Lampropeltis mexicana*, while others have tried to split the species into *Lampropeltis alterna* and *Lampropeltis blairi*. The gray-banded kingsnake is highly variable in color and pattern, but is generally marked with broad bands of gray that alternate with narrower bands of black. The black bands are usually outlined with a single row of white scales and sometimes highlighted with a red saddle or band in the middle of the black bands. Specimens with these red and black bands were originally named *Lampropeltis blairi* by Flury in 1950. It was not until the middle of the 1960s that the red-banded form was accepted as a color form of the typical gray-banded kingsnake. Here we follow the currently accepted view of Degenhardt, Painter, and Rice (1996) that maintains this is a single, polymorphic species.

The gray-banded kingsnake is a medium sized snake, seldom exceeding three feet in length, although the record is well over four feet (57¼ inches). The brilliant coloration is the most evident key toward field identification. However, use a bit of caution as the banded rock rattlesnake *Crotalus lepidus klauberi* (Gloyd, 1936) has a similar pattern of gray and black bands and lives in the same habitat as the gray-banded kingsnake. Side by side in a captive environment the two are easily distinguished, if by no other method than by the rattles on the banded rock rattlesnake. However, at night in a rock crevice or along a blacktop road in a clump of grass, the two can appear very similar, and more than one nighttime herper has grabbed for his or her gray-banded prize only to receive a real heart activating surprise. To heighten this similarity problem, the gray-banded kingsnake is the only North American kingsnake with a broad head and narrow neck, again, somewhat reminiscent of a rattlesnake. Of course, the pupils of the rather large eyes are round in the gray-banded kingsnake, while the banded rock rattlesnake has vertical pupils typical to rattlesnakes.

The range of the gray-banded kingsnake is from northern Mexico, through southeastern Texas to the very southeast corner of New Mexico. In the United States this range encompasses the area to the west of Del Rio, Texas, the Rio Grande and Pecos River Drainages, and the Big Bend country. In New Mexico, the species is known from only a couple of sightings in the Carlsbad Cavern area.
of Eddy County and southeastern Otero County. This is a secretive, nocturnal snake and sightings are usually limited to occasional road crossings at night from April to October. In Texas, where the snake has been heavily collected, several collectors have reported more common sightings ahead of an approaching thunderstorm.

The gray-banded kingsnake has been successfully maintained and bred through countless generations in captivity. At one time, just 10 years ago, a captive bred and eating (an important factor) gray-banded kingsnake demanded $300 or $400 and a wild caught specimen was at least $250. However, thousands have been bred in captivity and the price is now much more reasonable. Today there is no reason for anyone but a specialist or researcher to collect and keep a wild caught gray-banded kingsnake. The captive bred specimens are generally much easier to maintain and are almost always free of the many problems that can be associated with a wild caught specimen.

The gray-banded kingsnake is under varying degrees of protection in all parts of its range in the United States. In Texas all collecting has been controlled for the last two years and a special license is now required. In New Mexico, the gray-banded kingsnake is officially listed by the state as an endangered species. This was the result of a State Game Commission ruling in March, 2000. Another meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, 11 October, at the Pecos River Village Conference Center, 6:00 to 8:00pm, in Carlsbad, New Mexico. This meeting will be chaired by the New Mexico Game and Fish, and is the first stop in developing a recovery plan for the gray-banded kingsnake in New Mexico. Public input is invited.

In the wild, gray-banded kingsnakes eat mostly lizards with an occasional snake thrown in and, very rarely, a rodent. For years this was a major stumbling block to the successful breeding of these snakes. If the keeper was lucky enough to get a clutch of eggs that hatched, he was then presented with 12 or so young snakes that would only eat lizards: pinky mice were generally refused. Breeders eventually learned to scent pinky mice with a lizard, and maybe half of a clutch would eventually begin eating mice. Today’s captive-bred varieties are much easier to start on pinkies, and fewer and fewer hatchlings refuse standard captive fare.

Captive care is straightforward and pretty much like that demanded by most kingsnakes. A dry, heated terrarium or converted aquarium is suitable. A ten-gallon tank is sufficient for a young snake, but the size should be increased as the snake matures. An adult will do nicely in a 20-gallon long aquarium. Although gray-banded kingsnakes are not prone to cannibalism, only a single individual should be kept per enclosure. Cage substrate can be sand, newspaper, indoor/outdoor carpet, commercial bedding, or aspen shavings (stay away from cedar or redwood shavings as they release a toxic chemical). A small dish with fresh, clean water must be provided and this should be large enough for the
snake to soak in as an aid to shedding. There must be some sort of hiding box to enable the snake to feel secure. Lighting is not critical but the temperature is -- it should be in the range of 70°F to 80°F during the day and allowed to drop to the low 70s F at night. Like most southwest reptiles, the cage must be kept dry. A damp environment will quickly lead to disease and eventual death.

Breeding is like that for other kingsnakes and must be proceeded by a period of brumation or hibernation. There are several excellent books that cover this subject in depth. Breeding takes place in early summer with up to 12 in a clutch of eggs. The young hatch after about two months incubation. Again, details can be found in several books.

In a closing note, the author owns the young male gray-banded kingsnake pictured here. It was raised from a neonate and fed immediately after the first shedding upon pinky mice. It is extremely tractable, easy to handle, and has a robust appetite. This snake is more alert and aware of its surroundings than other king and milksnakes in the author's collection. If I could have only a single snake, it would be *Lampropeltis alterna*.

Material for this article came from:


