

by  
Bruce Atherton

# Tricks of the

The gray-banded kingsnake (*Lampropeltis alterna*) is a notorious lizard eater. Scenting a pinky with a lizard can encourage active feeding.



# Trade

Years of experience have taught this author how to get even the most stubborn colubrid hatchling to eat.

Anyone who has bred reptiles, kept them as pets or is planning to get into reptiles may learn a trick or two from the ideas in this article. The suggestions presented here are directed toward keeping and breeding colubrids and are largely my own personal feeding methods based on years of trial and error. I have also included ideas suggested to me by professional breeders, herpetologists, hobbyists and collectors.

One of the most prevalent concerns among reptile keepers is feeding, especially feeding hatchlings or newly acquired baby snakes. Fortunately, there are a number of tricks to get a reluctant snake to eat.

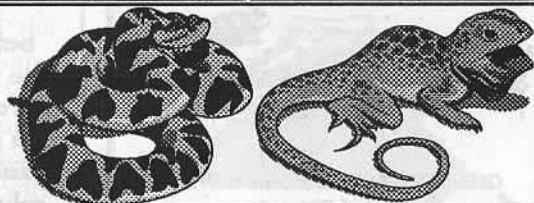
Feeding baby snakes can be a very frustrating experience. Mice are the easiest, most convenient and readily available food source for baby snakes and all rodent-eating reptiles. But mice are not the normal diet for a number of baby snakes in the wild, and therein lies the problem. Many tricks and techniques have been used by reptile keepers to encourage feeding. I will discuss some of the most commonly used and a few not so familiar tips.

In the wild, lizards are one of the most common food items of young snakes. The popular gray-banded kingsnake (*Lampropeltis alterna*) is a notorious lizard eater, and it can sometimes be difficult to wean them off lizard-scented

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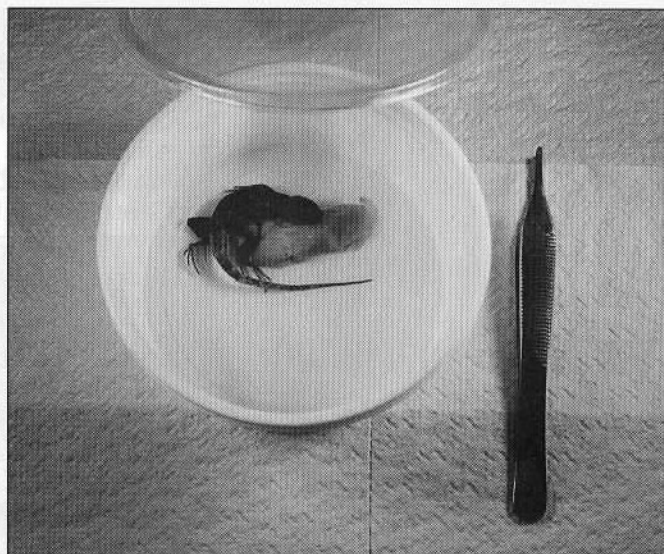
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A number of baby snakes in the wild feed on lizards. Scenting a pinky with a lizard can entice reluctant eaters.



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The common western fence lizard (*Sceloporus occidentalis*) is an ideal choice for scenting pinkies.

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mice. To entice a reluctant or stubborn snake to feed, I place a live or pre-killed pinky mouse in a small container with a wild-caught lizard, such as the small western fence lizard (*Sceloporus occidentalis*), for about five minutes. This will transfer the lizard's scent to the mouse.

When you offer the scented pinky mouse to your snake, it should seize it immediately. If not, place the snake and the pinky in a dark, undisturbed place for about an hour. If the snake has eaten the pinky, terrific! After several meals like this, you can gradually wean your snake off scented mice. Then you can thank the lizard for its services and release it back to the wild.

But what if the lizard-scenting trick doesn't work? More drastic measures must be taken. Repeat the above technique, but first smear the lizard's feces

on the pinky. You may have to try both live and pre-killed pinky mice to achieve success. If this fails, break off the lizard's tail and rub the bloody end on the pinky's head. This almost always works. I have also been successful using a lizard's shed skin. Just place a small piece of skin in a pre-killed pinky's mouth. Sometimes your local pet shop may have some fresh shed lizard skins it will gladly part with. Green anoles (*Anolis carolinensis*) are very common pet shop lizards and can be used in place of wild-caught lizards for scenting purposes. If scenting will not work, offer your snake a suitably sized lizard as a meal. This will ensure your snake receives a whole meal.

Another way to entice a stubborn snake to eat is to wash a freshly killed pinky with mild soap and water to



remove all adult-mouse scent. Be sure to rinse off all traces of soap residue. You don't want your snake blowing bubbles! In the wild, adult mice, rats, shrews and other rodents will kill and sometimes eat small reptiles, so some baby snakes are afraid of adult mice. I believe this is why some species of baby snakes avoid or are very cautious around pinky rodents that retain adult-mouse scent. Eventually, you will find it unnecessary to wash your snake's food prior to feeding.

Even colubrids that are known to eat with little or no special treatment can still be finicky eaters on occasion. I have a beautiful tangerine phase Honduran milk snake (*Lampropeltis triangulum hondurensis*). When he was a young snake, he refused all feeding efforts. This species of milk snake is generally a very aggressive feeder, but this snake wasn't. To pique his appetite, I split open a prekilled pinky's head with a scalpel and smeared the brain matter all

over the front portion of the mouse. I know this sounds a bit gruesome, but I offered the pinky to the snake and he seized it immediately. I still wonder who discovered this macabre trick. The split-pinky technique is probably one of the best ways to get almost any stubborn hatchling reptile or snake to start eating. Generally, only one or two offerings will start your reptile on a more normal feeding routine.

Scenting with somewhat uncommon food items is another trick I have learned over the years. The following trick is one I have found necessary for snakes that are notorious snake eaters, (ophiophagous) such as the eastern chain kingsnake (*Lampropeltis getulus*)

*getulus*). I usually use a garter snake (genus *Thamnophis*) that I obtain at my local pet shop. Smearing the snake's feces on a live pinky mouse and then offering it to the chain king usually works immediately. The snake takes the food with great enthusiasm.

Another good trick is to scent pinky mice with fish. I was able to get a stubborn blotched kingsnake (*Lampropeltis g. goni*) to eat by rubbing a guppy on a pinky mouse. The snake only required two offerings of scented mice before it ate normally.

I have also used various wild-caught creatures, such as frogs, tadpoles, mice, earthworms and salamanders, for scenting purposes. All of this work for a variety of stubborn baby snakes that just refuse to make life simple.

Sometimes I use the wet-pinky technique. Allow your problem feeder to go without water for about 10 days, then soak a prekilled pinky in warm water (ap-

proximately 90 degrees Fahrenheit) for about an hour. Offer the somewhat soggy meal to your snake and place it in a quiet, undisturbed place for about an hour. With a little luck, the snake will drink the moisture off the pinky and eat the pinky in the process. Do this with caution. You do not want to dangerously dehydrate your snake and cause further problems.

When all else fails and your prize reptile refuses to eat, it is time to use the dreaded pinky pump—a syringe in which you place a prekilled pinky mouse and liquefy it by compressing the plunger. The method is somewhat risky, and I highly recommend that you have an expert or someone who has

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done this procedure many times help you. Actually, it is always best to have two people perform the procedure. Gently work a well-lubricated, small-diameter tube (I like to use chicken egg yolk) down the snake's throat to approximately  $\frac{1}{3}$  the length of the snake's body. Apply gentle pressure to the plunger, and force the pinky into the snake's stomach. Hopefully, the snake will keep the contents in its stomach and not regurgitate. Generally, one

will eat anything at almost any time: mice, rats, fingers etc. Snakes, as well as other reptiles, exhibit a wide range of habits and personalities.

A difficult baby snake, one who seems indifferent to both live and freshly killed food, will sometimes feed if put in total darkness. Also, the time of day you feed your reptiles can make a big difference. For example, I have some specimens that will only eat at night. Others will feed any time food is



**For snakes that are notorious snake eaters, such as the eastern chain kingsnake (*Lampropeltis g. getulus*) shown here, scenting a pinky with a garter snake may be necessary.**

or two procedures will be sufficient to get a stubborn snake to feed normally.

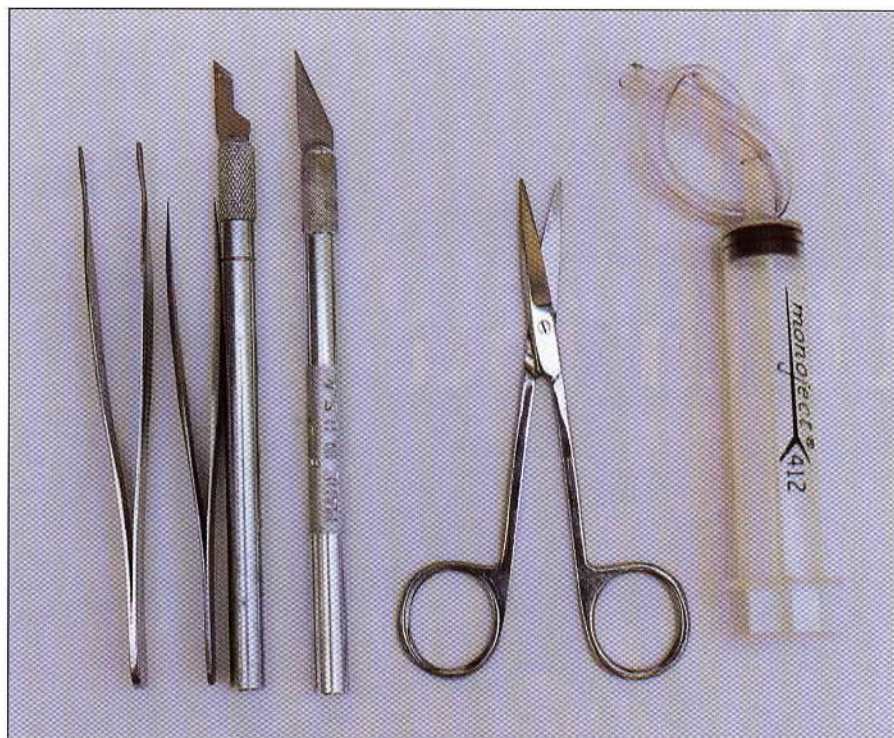
Over the years, through trial and error, I have discovered some nonfood tricks to stimulate feeding in hatchling snakes. One of the most common items, and most critical with some snakes, is a hide box. In the wild, the three primary concerns for snakes are shelter, food and a mate, in that order. I have seen a simple hide box work miracles as far as getting a stubborn or reluctant reptile to eat. It can be a simple cardboard box lid with a hole cut in one side. This makes an ideal place for your snake to retreat. When the box becomes soiled, you can discard it. My adult female Central American black-tailed cribo (*Drymarcon corals couperi*) absolutely refuses to eat without her "security blanket." But her male counterpart from the same clutch does not need a hide box. He

offered. Snakes are very in tune with their external environment, and they sometimes just do not care how warm or dark their artificial captive surroundings are.

Some young snakes, and adults for that matter, will feed all year long, provided temperature requirements are met. Others fast periodically. Many species of mountain kingsnakes are periodic fasters. Anyone who attempts to feed them during the winter months has probably experienced this activity, or lack of activity.

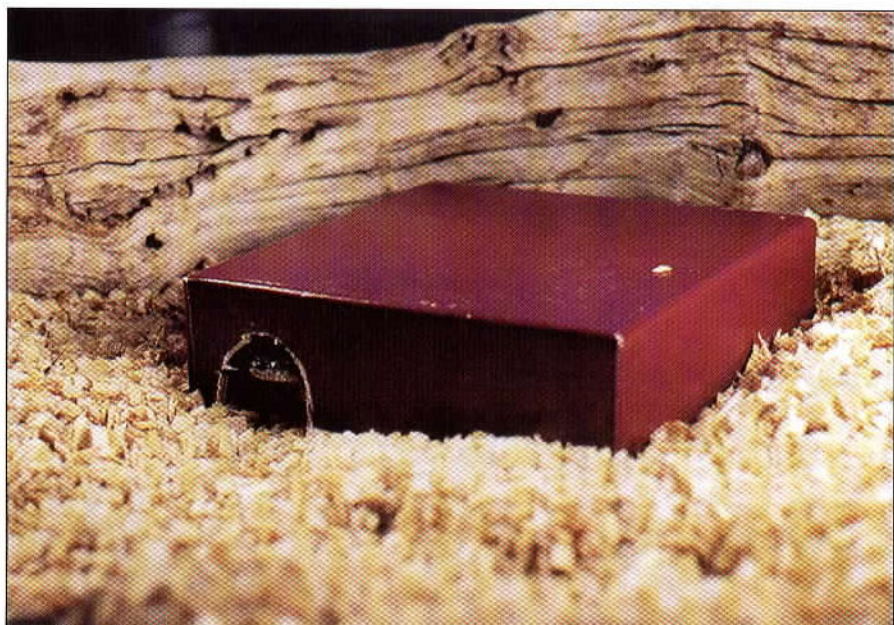
Very small baby snakes can sometimes be a real challenge to feed. I use a technique that works quite well, even for the smallest snake. Take a prekilled pinky mouse, a newborn if possible, and freeze it solid. Then slice it lengthwise and allow it to thaw. This will provide a whole meal for your diminutive reptile.





Bruce Atherton

A pinky pump, far right, is considered a last resort. Other tools used for scenting prey items include tweezers, scalpels and shears.



Bruce Atherton

A hide box can provide two things some snakes require to eat readily: darkness and seclusion.

Continue this process until sufficient growth has taken place. Then you can offer your snake a small, live pinky mouse.

I have heard that some snake keepers and breeders feed their hatchling snakes mouse tails because their snakes are too small to eat pinkies. This is not a whole meal with all the nutritional requirements needed for proper growth. Your snake could actually die if fed nothing

but mouse tails. Supplementary vitamins may help, but I recommend the entire animal, if possible.

Reluctant feeding habits only affect a minority of snakes. Most baby snakes will readily take pinky mice or rats without any special treatment. But, with the high price of some snakes and reptiles on the market today, some in the thousands of dollars, you want to have as many tricks up your sleeve as possible. ✱

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