

GLADYS PORTER

ZOO



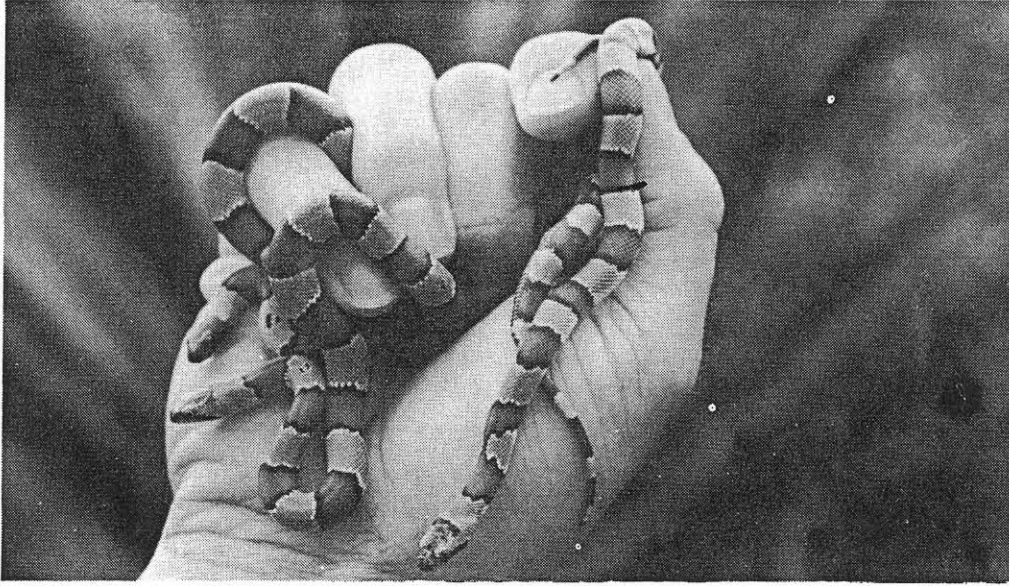
NEWS

BROWNSVILLE, TEXAS

SEPTEMBER - OCTOBER, 1976

Published by the Valley Zoological Society

VOL. 5, NO. 5



A fistful of baby Kingsnakes!

RARE KINGSNAKES HATCH

by Patrick M. Burchfield

On September 23, 1976, the Reptile Department of the Gladys Porter Zoo entered into its daily log, the hatching of the rare Texas Kingsnake - - - not one but three!

The Kingsnakes of the *mexicana* complex are among the most beautiful as well as the most sought after snakes occurring in the United States and Mexico. An abundance of professional and amateur snake collectors using the technique of road hunting at night have shown that these snakes are not as rare as they were once thought to be. The increase in the number of captive specimens in zoos and private collections, however, in no way diminishes the beauty or desirability of this fascinating animal. Unfortunately, our readers cannot appreciate the subtle greys, striking blacks, and rich red-oranges of the snakes pictured in this article.

As a direct result of the large number of snake collectors who hunt for this animal, professional herpetologists in Texas are presently attempting to pass legislation to protect the grey-banded Kingsnake as well as several other native Texas reptiles indigenous to the Southwest Texas region. Until recently, the two phenotypes (physical characteristics) were considered to be two separate geographic races of *Lampropeltis mexicana* occurring in Southwest Texas, the bright orange-patterned *blairi* and the bicolored *alterna* phase.

With captive hatching of clutches conceived in the wild containing examples of both color and both pattern phases, the snakes have subsequently been designated as the Grey-banded Kingsnake, *Lampropeltis mexicana alterna*.

The Zoo collection boasts two sexual pairs of these animals. Breeding was observed in 1973, 1974 and 1975 but no eggs were produced. This year, 1976, the snakes were again observed breeding on several occasions in the months of May and June. During the daily routine of caring for the snakes, the reptile department crew decided one of the females looked heavy with eggs. To eliminate the possibility of losing the eggs to the ravenous appetites of display mates, she was placed into seclusion and off display. Four days later, on July 9th, we were elated to discover three beautiful, seemingly perfect eggs which were one inch wide and two-and-a-half inches long. The eggs were washed off

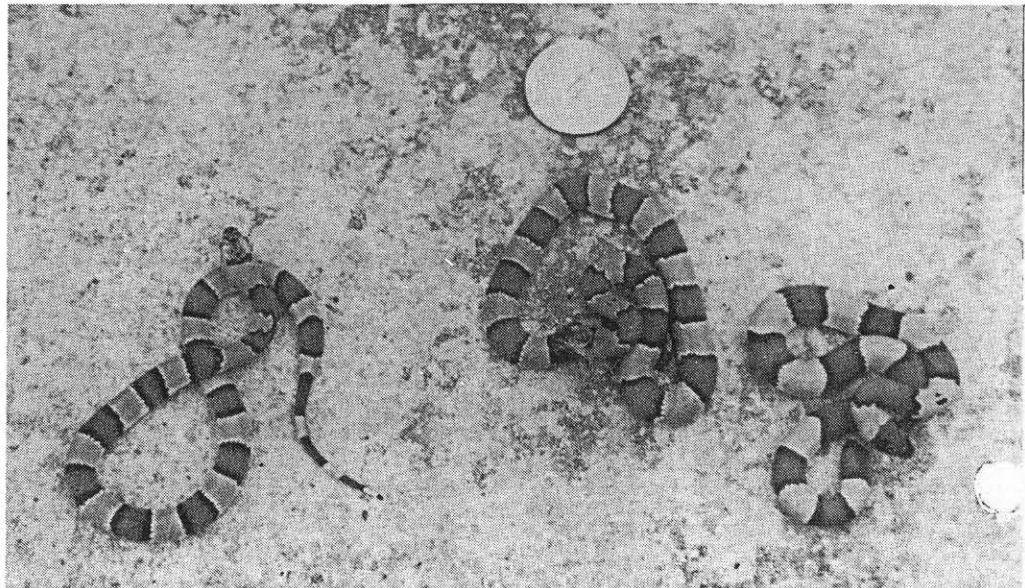
and placed in a sealed gallon jar with damp paper towels to provide humidity. The eggs were then kept at room temperature with ranges from 72°F to 78°F. On the 22nd of September, the first embryo began slitting the egg with its eggtooth. It was removed and placed in a separate container. Routinely, our reptile keepers carefully remove a triangular patch of the eggshell to insure against disorientation by the hatchling, thus assisting in its exit from the shell. Unless this is done, baby reptiles become disoriented and remain in the egg and eventually die. The baby snakes "apparently" expend a great deal of energy in their initial and critical surge to escape from the confines of the egg. By the next morning, the baby snake had made its exit and was busily inspecting his new environment.

The same day, September 23rd, the remaining two eggs began to hatch. The following afternoon all three eggs had hatched without complications.

The baby snakes are miniature replicas of their parents, exhibiting the same beautiful orange, grey, black and white colorations.

Baby Kingsnakes in the wild feed on small snakes, lizards, and probably various insect species. At the Gladys Porter Zoo, we will attempt to get them to eat small born mice which are quite suitable and more readily available than feed snakes and lizards.

The Zoo is indeed indebted to Mr. Earl Turner of Harlingen, Texas, who not only personally collected the adult animals, but graciously donated them to our Zoo's collection. Mr. Turner is one of the foremost experts on this and many other Trans Pecos Texas species.



Tiny, colorful and coveted snakes - newly hatched Kingsnakes.