

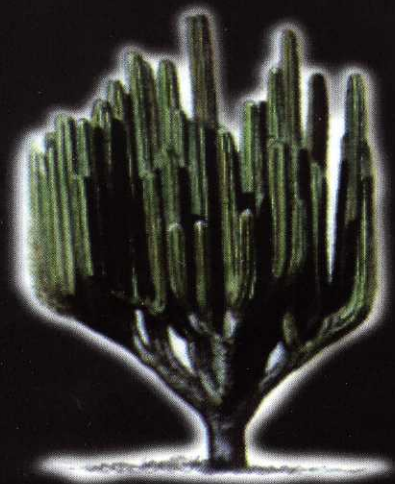
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Leonis phase individual. The background colour can vary from cream to grey



THE NUEVO LEON KINGSNAKE

LAMPROPELTIS MEXICANA THAYERI



By Chris Mattison



Photos by the author



The Nuevo Leon kingsnake, *Lampropeltis mexicana thayeri* Loveridge, 1924 is one of four subspecies belonging to the Mexican kingsnake complex. The other three are the San Luis Potosí kingsnake *L. mexicana mexicana* (Garman, 1884); the Durango kingsnake, *L. mexicana greeri* Webb, 1961; and the grey-banded kingsnake, *L. mexicana alterna* Brown, 1901 (sometimes regarded as a separate species, *L. alterna*). All of these small kingsnakes make excellent choices for the vivarium.

Lampropeltis mexicana thayeri is probably the least known and certainly the most confusing. For a start, it has three common names: they are Nuevo Leon kingsnake (after the Mexican state of Nuevo Leon, where it lives); Thayer's kingsnake; and variable kingsnake. Secondly, it occurs in a number of different colour patterns, sometimes known as 'leonis phase', 'milksnake phase' and 'black phase'. In addition to all this variation, leonis phase animals may have cream, grey or 'buckskin' backgrounds - buckskin being a pinky beige colour. By now you are probably getting some idea of why it is sometimes called the 'variable' kingsnake!

Notwithstanding all this, any form of the Nuevo Leon kingsnake is attractive and worth looking out for. A brief description of the three basic forms is as follows:

Leonis phase animals have a plain background of grey, cream or pink with narrow, well-separated crossbars or 'slashes', which have red centres and black borders. Their heads are usually unmarked or they have a small dark figure on top.

Milksnake phase animals are red, cream and black, with their markings arranged as rings of roughly equal width - like a milksnake, *Lampropeltis triangulum* (Lacépède, 1788).

Black phase animals are black - no surprises here - and look superficially like a Mexican black kingsnake, *Lampropeltis getula nigrilus* Zweifel & Norris, 1995 when young but have a different body shape.

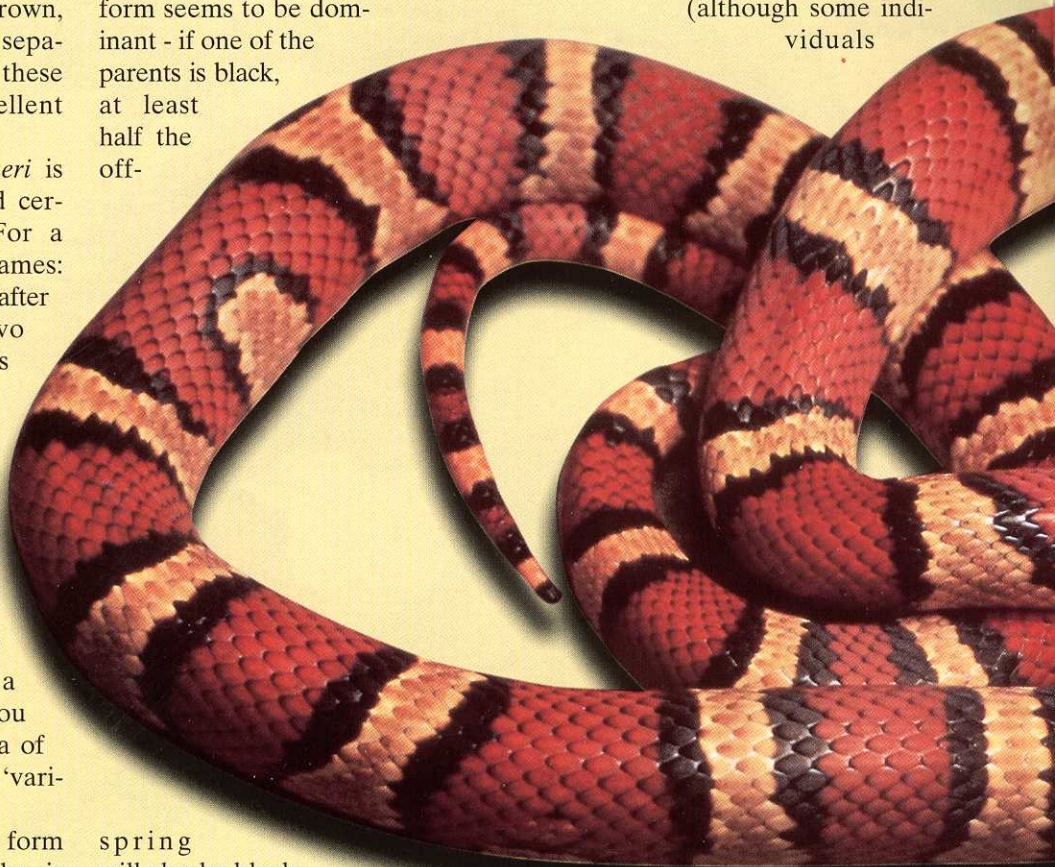
Although the genetics of this snake have not been thoroughly sorted out, more than one form of offspring can be produced from a single clutch of eggs. The black form seems to be dominant - if one of the parents is black, at least half the off-

spring will also be black and, sometimes, they will all be black (depending on the genetic make-up of the black parent). Breeding from two leonis phase animals produces a whole clutch of leonis phase young but their colours can vary.

L. m. thayeri reaches a total length of about 60 cm, or just over two feet, making it an ideal snake to keep in a small terrarium or plastic drawer. It is roughly cylindrical in cross-section, like most kingsnakes, and its head is flattened from top to bottom and is only slightly wider than its neck.

Maintenance

In captivity, this snake is a pleasure to keep. It rarely, if ever, bites and has a placid disposition, being quite oblivious to handling although, when you first open its cage, you might sometimes get a nip from a greedy individual that thinks you are going to feed it. It has a good appetite and will usually feed on mice that have been frozen then thawed (although some individuals

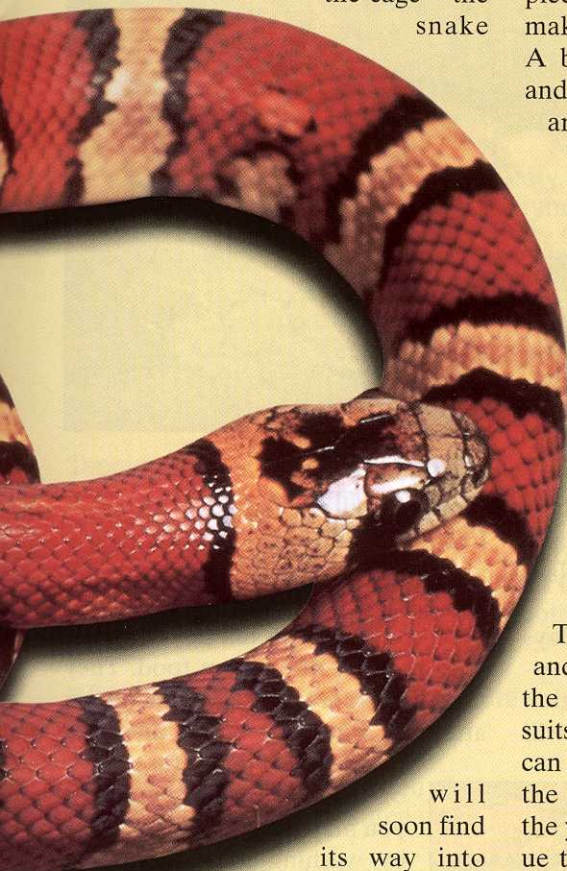


Milksnake phase snakes are patterned like a milksnake

prefer freshly-killed mice). It can take surprisingly large mice, considering its small head, and grows quickly if fed regularly. In my experience it is easier to care for than either the grey-banded kingsnake or the Durango kingsnake, and every bit as easy as the more popular Mexican kingsnake.

You can keep adults in a variety of cages. Some breeders use a basic

plastic boxes or drawers measuring approximately 60 x 30 x 15 cm. They need very little in the way of furnishings, just a layer of wood shavings and a water bowl. If you give them a hide box they will probably be happier but it is not essential – a terracotta flowerpot makes a good hide box if you enlarge the drainage hole then place the pot upside down in the cage – the snake



will soon find its way into the upturned pot and the rough surface will help it to get rid of its skin when the time comes.

If you prefer to keep your snakes on display, this little kingsnake makes a good exhibit for a small glass terrarium. You can use a number of different materials on the floor of the cage, including pebbles or bark chippings but I prefer to use a layer of dead leaves (beech or bracken) because they look natural but are very practical as well – you can easily throw them away when they are dirty and replace them with

fresh leaves. They don't cost anything, either! To make the display more attractive, you can add some branches or rocks but be careful not to overcrowd the cage. Living plants do not usually survive for long in such cages because they need more light and a higher humidity than the snake. If you wish, you can use artificial plants but, in my opinion, pieces of dead branch or driftwood make the cage look just as attractive. A bowl of clean water is essential and you can either use the bowls that are supposed to look like miniature rock pools, or a small dish made from glass or glazed pottery, which will probably be more practical and easier to clean.

Whichever kind of cage you use, you should keep the snakes at a temperature of about 20-25°C during the daytime in summer. Nighttime temperatures can be lower but this is not essential. The best way to heat them is to provide an undercage heat-pad at one end of the box or cage. This creates a thermal gradient and the snake can move around in the cage to find the position that suits it best at any given time. You can keep young Nuevo kingsnakes at the same temperature throughout the year and they will usually continue to feed in the winter and, therefore, grow more quickly. To breed them, however, you will have to find somewhere cool to house them for a few months.

Breeding

You should cool Nuevo Leon kingsnakes during the winter if you hope to breed from them. A temperature of 15°C is probably adequate although 10°C is better. They will certainly withstand colder conditions than this if they are in good condition because their natural range includes mountains where the winter temperatures are below freezing. As

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All text must be typewritten and double-spaced. Feature articles should be about 1500-2000 words in length. Submit tables and diagrams if they help clarify text. Submission on disk or e-mail is necessary (3.5", WordPerfect 4.2, 5.0, Windows or Mac is preferred) and should be accompanied by a (mailed) signed hard copy as well.

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STYLISTIC NORMS

Name of the species

The name of the species must appear completely on the title and on its first apparition in the text, according to the following norms:

- a) Genus in italics and not bold, with only the initial in capitals.
- b) Species in italics with the initial in small letter.
- c) Respect the presence or absence of brackets and square brackets with the author and the date of the species' description. The brackets mean that the species has originally been described with a taxonomic combination that differs from the actual one. Examples: *Graellsia isabelae* (Graells, 1849)

Isis isabelae Graells, 1849.

The square brackets indicate that this is a date we know now but which did not explicitly show in the original description.

Example: *Euchloe ausonia* (Hübner, [1849]). Hübner's books were not dated but we know the date of edition thanks to the invoices from the printers.

In later citations the name of the author and the year can be omitted, and the genus can be simplified by its abbreviation with the initial. One has to keep in mind, though, that certain combinations of letters belong together.

Example: *Phragmatobia fuliginosa* becomes *Ph. fuliginosa*.

The latin names of superior groups (family, subfamily, etc.) must be written in italics, with the initial in capital. Neither author nor date have to be stated (unless the article is a monography of the theme, in which case the above stated norms must be followed). These names do not have plural when written in latin.

Example: The Terrapene are very resistant turtles when one knows how to keep them.

Bibliography

In case of a book, it must include: Author (or authors). Year. Title. Publishing company. Town.

Example: VIVES-BALMAÑA, M.V., 1984. Els amfibis i els rèptils de Catalunya. Ketres Editora. Barcelona.

In case of an article, it must include: Author (or authors). Year. Complete title. Name of the magazine. Volume (issue) and pages.

Example: FALCÓ, G., 1995. La tortuga radiada, una atracció irresistible. *Reptilia* 2 (2): 36-39.

For further questions, contact:



REPTILIA

Muntaner 88, 5º 1ª
Tel.: ++ 34 3 -451 53 26
Fax: ++ 34 3 -454 74 34
08011 Barcelona, Spain
E-mail: reptilia@lander.es



Many leonis phase animals have copper coloured heads

with all snakes, you will only be able to give them a winter rest (and therefore breed them) if they are well fed and healthy. Warm them up in the early spring (February to April) and give them one or two meals before putting the male and female together. They will usually mate soon after you have introduced them although they may wait until one or both have shed their skin. In any case, it is a good idea to leave them together for a couple of weeks - I have never heard of any cases of cannibalism in this kingsnake.

The female lays her eggs about forty days after mating, and about ten days after her pre-laying shed. An average clutch consists of six to eight eggs although young females may only lay three or four and especially large ones have been known to lay over ten. Some breeders put the snakes back together for a

second clutch but this is only advisable if the female has fed well and regained her body weight after laying the first clutch.

The eggs hatch after about 70 days at 28°C. Part of the pleasure in keeping this kingsnake is the anticipation of seeing the hatchlings - they will

probably all be slightly different from each other and you will nearly always get one or two really pretty hatchlings. They shed when they are about one week to ten days old and then you can offer them food. They usually start feeding after one or two attempts but sometimes they are

obstinate. If any refuse to eat on several successive attempts you may have to scent a pinky by washing it in water and rubbing it over a lizard. Another technique that works well with this snake (and several others) is to take away the heat from any hatchlings that have not fed by the time they are about two months old. Keep them cool (about 10°C) for two or three months and then put them back on the heat. You will usually find that they start feeding now. As a last resort, you may have to try force-feeding, although I have rarely found that is necessary. ■



Black phase animals are black