

THE LIFE OF DESERT REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS

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ALL ANIMALS PHOTOGRAPHED IN THEIR
NATURAL HABITAT - IN FULL COLOR



GRAY-BANDED KINGSNAKE, *Lampropeltis mexicana alterna*

Distribution: West Texas and adjacent Mexico. Scattered distribution throughout its known range. Most commonly found in the Chihuahuan Desert of west Texas, where numerous individuals have been sited among the rock out-croppings bordering the Rio Grande.

Size: A medium-sized snake, reaching a maximum length of about 3½ feet; however, the average length is far below this. Color and pattern is quite variable. No two specimens are exactly alike. The picture-book phase of a solid gray ground color with narrow black bands is far and few between. Most individuals of this color pattern are now produced in captivity. More often than not a wild captured *alterna* will show traces of red, orange, black, or all three colors.

Food: For a fact we know that *alterna* feeds on lizards and rodents in the wild. One specimen which I captured personally later defecated the remains of two snake eggs.

Captive Care: Due to the fact that many people are now breeding this species in captivity, you can imagine the variations of success. Some keep the snakes on newspaper and have good luck. Others insist that gravel be used as a ground media, and others still keep the snakes on coarse wood shavings with equally good success. In the wilds this species is associated with rock out-croppings, or at least a very rough ground surface. I for one would keep the snake in a terrarium with gravel as a ground cover, and provide a number of flat rocks for the specimens to hide under. This is a nocturnal species and by no means fond of excessive lighting. If you are keeping the snakes on newspaper or wood shavings, then at least provide a hiding box in the form of a cardboard carton or a dark colored plastic container.

The size of the terrarium depends somewhat on the size of the specimen. An adult can safely be housed in a 15 gallon capacity aquarium. Juveniles do well in a gallon jar or a plastic shoe box. Keeping more than one individual together seems to work out o.k., but do remember that you are dealing with a *Lampropeltis* and kingsnakes have been known to feed on snakes, including their own kind.

Alterna are most active during the hot, humid, summer months. During this time they have ample opportunities to partake of water. For this reason I suggest that you keep a small container with fresh drinking water in the terrarium at all times. In addition, place some moss in the hide box to aid with the shedding process; this is especially true for juveniles.

Daytime temperature should be maintained at about 85°F, which can drop to the low seventies at night. If you are going to breed this species, then hibernating the adults over the winter months will aid in the success. Feeding can be a problem. Some individuals will take rodents immediately, while others insist on lizards. Many of the newly hatched individuals prefer the lizards. This trick often works. Place a pink mouse or two in with some lizards. Leave them there for a few hours to pick up the reptilian smell, then offer them to the snakes. An egg laying species.