

Picturesque rivers, buttes and mountains abound in the Trans-Pecos region of Texas, a land filled with overwhelming natural beauty and rich in variety and abundance of plant and animal life.

The northernmost third of the Chihuahuan Desert encompasses this area of the state. Commonly known as "Judge Roy Bean Country," the region is typified by such plant life as the ocotillo, yucca and prickly-pear cactus.

Countless forms of animal life occur here, some of which are found in no other locale in the world. Well-known animals which typify this area include the vinegaroon (a harmless whip scorpion), Texas diamondback rattlesnake, roadrunner and mountain lion.

One animal found only in this environment is the gray-banded kingsnake, *Lampropeltis mexicana alterna*. First scientifically described as a species in 1902, it is one of the most beautiful of all snakes. The patterns and color combinations suggest a ceremonial painting by an Indian artist. Rings of

platinum gray, orange, black and white comprise one of the most vividly and strikingly colored of North American serpents. This highly variable snake is also unique in that it presents four pattern variations, one of which was described erroneously as a separate species in 1950.

The geographic range of the gray-banded kingsnake includes the northwestern boundary of the Edwards Plateau, west to the Christmas Mountains near the Texas ghost town of Terlingua, northwesterly to the Guadalupe Mountains and Hueco Mountains of extreme western Texas, and thence southerly into adjacent areas of Mexico.

In the United States, the gray-banded kingsnake is found only in Texas. Very few specimens had reached university and museum collections until recently; however, new highways cut through the heartland of this creature's limited domain have made them more accessible to collectors (scientific or otherwise).

Most desert species of reptiles

are nocturnal (night dwellers) because their upper temperature tolerances do not permit them to be active during the heat of the day. The gray-banded kingsnake shares this characteristic and rarely has been observed during the day. I have seen this reptile abroad during the day on only two occasions — in both instances, preceding an early morning shower. Twilight activity is not uncommon, especially in rocky canyons, cliffs and dry washes, where several individuals have been observed searching for food.

This kingsnake generally feeds on lizards and small rodents such as pocket mice. On occasion, a mottled rock rattlesnake is consumed, but lizards normally are the staple of the diet.

This snake is a relatively small species when compared to many other forms of the kingsnake. The

Colorful Kingsnake of the Trans-Pecos

Article and photographs by Earl H. Turner



average size is 2½ feet in length, but specimens slightly in excess of four feet have been observed.

As with most types of desert animals, activity of this reptile is governed by climatic conditions. Pressure systems cause them to become very active, especially prior to a cooling summer shower. Another interesting bit of information concerns the effect of wind on animal activity. The majority of desert reptiles regard a still, windless night as an optimum opportunity for grocery shopping. The gray-banded kingsnake generally stays home during such an evening, but windy conditions are a green light for this kingsnake and rush-hour traffic ensues as the search for a nightly snack begins.

Unlike most animals, reptiles include species which are capable either of laying eggs or bearing living young. The gray-banded kingsnake is an egg layer. The average clutch contains eight white, oval eggs with a granular texture. The average hatching time is 63 days and the newly hatched kingsnakes average 9½ inches in length. The young present the same vividness of color and pattern as do the adults.

A scientific first occurred when twin gray-banded kingsnakes (left) were hatched from a single egg. The "Blairmorph" pattern variation (lower left) was erroneously described in 1950 as a separate species. The "Alternamorph" variation (below) was first described in 1902 as the Davis Mountains kingsnake.



In September 1975, a most unusual situation occurred. A clutch consisting of only three eggs from a small captive adult female hatched, producing four young kingsnakes. One egg contained two identically marked snakes, both of which cut through the covering of the egg, crawled out, vibrated their tails and struck in a defensive manner. This was perhaps the first recorded hatching of perfectly formed, identical snakes from a single egg. Twinning abnormalities are common among reptiles, however. Most zoos have exhibited specimens such as snakes with two heads.

In the desert southwest, nightfall causes considerable lowering of air and ground temperatures. Consequently, since they are unable to control their body temperature, nocturnal reptiles tend to crawl onto asphalt roads that retain heat from the daytime sun. Here, they absorb sufficient heat to enable them to continue their nightly quest for food. Collectors who are aware of this habit employ a catch method known as "road-running." By driving between 15 and 25 miles per hour, they have sufficient time to spot the snake, stop the car and cap-

ture any specimen on or near the road.

Collectors have flocked into West Texas during the late spring and early summer months in quest of the easy money to be made in return for this rare reptile. Several collectors in the Trans-Pecos area have, in the past, collected dozens of specimens per year. One such individual in the Comstock area has annually collected and sold them in quantity to dealers in California.

According to zoological parks, the retail monetary value of a gray-banded kingsnake varies from \$200 to \$250 depending on the dealer and the size and color phase of the individual specimen, hence the reason for exploitation. If unlimited collecting is allowed to continue, the extirpation of this species from areas where it is easily found could become a reality.

Due to its beauty and scarcity, the limitation of its range, plus the ruthlessness of professional collectors, this harmless creature's existence is indeed severely threatened in Trans-Pecos Texas, the only area in the United States where it occurs.

Recognizing the need for protection from excessive collecting, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department is currently considering proposed regulations which would curtail commercial exploitation of a number of nongame wildlife species. This rare snake is one. These regulations are expected to be in effect before the 1977 collecting season.

Already in effect are protective regulations dealing with 39 Texas vertebrate wildlife species legally classified as "endangered." Among these are the well-known whooping crane, red wolf, Atlantic Ridley sea turtle, Houston toad and the Comanche Springs pupfish.

Less stringent protective measures are in effect for a number of reptiles such as horned lizards, diamondback terrapins, sea turtles and Texas tortoises.

If protection is not provided, other names may appear on the tombstone of severely endangered species. An appropriate epitaph might read — "No one cared." **