

NEW VARIETIES OF KINGSNAKES FROM  
MEXICO

by

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On August 2, 1892, E. W. Nelson described a new kingsnake from Patzcuaro, Michoacan, Mexico, on the basis of one skin with the head attached, which he named Lampropeltis ruthveni. In Blanchard's 1921 Revision of the Kingsnakes: Genus Lampropeltis, he discusses ruthveni as probably being a close relative of Lampropeltis mulicincta (later zonata). In 1970 in his Systematics of the Colubrid Snake Lampropeltis triangulum, Lacepede, Kenneth Williams discusses several snakes which he examined as being intermediate forms between Lampropeltis triangulum nelsoni and L. t. blanchardi and questions the validity of ruthveni as a valid species, or even subspecies of triangulum and finally includes these as variations of L. t. arcifera, throwing out ruthveni.

In 1979 Ernie Wagner departed from Mexico City in a rented van with his three children and a barrel of Kentucky Fried Chicken and drove to Queretaro where they met Bill Gartska. Bill was down from Harvard University studying a population of Thamnophis and this was an opportunity for two old friends to get together again and spend a day in the field. Late that day, while hunting in the rocky outcroppings they caught three unusual kingsnakes which at first were thought to be a strange type of Lampropeltis m. mexicana, although this area is well south of the known range of mexicana. Hunting this area off and on during the next ten days while traveling to other areas of Mexico in between, Wagner was able to find no more of these snakes. Gartska meanwhile returned to his Thamnophis study site. Upon returning home, Wagner spent some time thinking about the habitat and possible microenvironment of these snakes and when the opportunity occurred he returned later that year with two friends and was able to find several more of the same kind of snake. This provided Gartska with the additional material he needed to investigate the taxonomic relationships of this animal and he eventually concluded that this was Lampropeltis ruthveni, a valid species of kingsnake. In the process of checking the accounts of the original specimen he discovered that an error may have occurred on

the original locality which may have added to the confusion and lack of additional specimens for so many years. At the present time a paper by him is being prepared re-instating Lampropeltis ruthveni as a valid species.

Another interesting kingsnake turned up several years ago in the mountains of Pueblo, Mexico, which obviously belongs to the triangulum group. It was found by Jonathan Campbell in an area where he had previously hunted before, but a long drought in the area had made many species of snakes scarce. Several of these snakes have been brought back and are being housed at the Dallas Zoo. Hugh Quinn of the Houston Zoo is currently in the process of working on the taxonomic relationships of this snake and describing it; and until his work has been published, this animal is being referred to as the Pueblo Kingsnake (Lampropeltis triangulum nov. ssp.).

Both of these instances serve to point out how large an area Mexico is and how much work remains to be done on the taxonomy of the kingsnakes from there. The mexicana group is still a very variable complex group with L. mexicana mexicana, L. m. alterna, and L. m. thayeri currently being the recognized forms. (Cf. HERPETOLOGY, 9:3, 3-7). L. m. leonis is no longer considered valid and in reality appears to be a sort of an alterna phase thayeri. L. m. greeri is considered to be a type of L. m. mexicana, but among keepers of these snakes is recognized as a distinct form. And of course in the north is the old L. m. blairi which is now lumped with alterna by taxonomists but recognized as a color phase by keepers. Because this genus of snakes is so variable in color and pattern, even within the same populations, and because the land and particular environmental conditions of each species is so distinct, and often hard to understand, the kingsnakes of Mexico should keep taxonomists and snake keepers amused ... or driven mad, for years to come.



Lampropeltis ruthveni Blanchard  
Mexican Mountain Kingsnake



Lampropeltis triangulum nov.ssp.  
Pueblo Kingsnake