REPTILE CARE GUIDE | UNITED STATES

Kingsnake

Lampropeltis spp. | Practical owner guide | Habitat, feeding, bathing, health and costs

An alert, active North American constrictor with strong feeding responses. It needs an escape-proof enclosure, individual housing and predictable handling and feeding routines.



Illustrative species photograph

15-page guide | For prospective and current keepers

1. Species Overview and Commitment

Adult size	Typical lifespan	Behavior and diet
Varies by species; many pet kingsnakes reach 3-6 ft	Often 15-20 years or more with good care	Terrestrial, active; carnivorous and may eat other snakes in nature

“Kingsnake” includes multiple Lampropeltis species and local forms, so size, temperature tolerance and care can vary. Identify the exact species and use a species-specific vet or care reference. Most commonly kept kingsnakes are active, curious, strong feeders and capable escape artists.

• Plan for a long-term commitment, adult enclosure, thermostatically controlled heat, frozen prey and reptile vet.

• Expect a solitary animal that values secure hides and predictable routine.

• Set up the habitat and verify its measurements before bringing the snake home.

A kingsnake is not a social companion. Keep it singly housed because many kingsnakes naturally eat other snakes.

2. Choose the Right Kingsnake

Ask for the exact common and scientific species, origin, hatch date, sexing method, feeding log, prey type, shed record and veterinary history.

Choose captive-bred animals from a responsible source and verify that they accept frozen-thawed prey. Keep all records. Check local rules before purchase or transport.

• Look for clear eyes outside shed, smooth scales, steady movement, normal body shape, clean vent and quiet closed-mouth breathing.

• Avoid wheezing, mucus, open-mouth breathing, sores, burns, mites, swelling, retained shed or severe thinness.

• Arrange an initial examination with a reptile-experienced veterinarian, particularly for rescued or wild-caught animals.

Quarantine a new snake separately from other reptiles with separate equipment and handwashing.

3. Adult Enclosure and Security

A secure enclosure about 4 x 2 x 2 ft (120 x 60 x 60 cm) is a useful adult target for many medium kingsnakes; larger species may need more room. Provide full-body stretch space and reliable locks.

• Use a front-opening, escape-resistant enclosure with snug doors and cable ports. Check the entire enclosure for gaps.

• Provide two snug hides, one at each end of the temperature gradient, plus cover and stable branches or cork.

• Include a heavy water bowl large enough for voluntary soaking. Keep it away from electrical fixtures and hot lamps.

• Add clutter and enrichment, but secure heavy furnishings so they cannot crush or trap the snake.

Never co-house kingsnakes with other snakes or other species, even if they appear calm together.

4. Heating, Humidity and Lighting

Feature	Starting range for many common pet kingsnakes
Warm hide / warm side	About 85-90°F (29-32°C)
Cool side	About 75-80°F (24-27°C)
Relative humidity	Often about 40-60%; varies by species and room
Light cycle	Consistent day/night cycle; dark at night

Confirm species-specific needs. Use digital probe thermometers at both ends, an infrared thermometer for surfaces and a hygrometer at snake level. Do not rely on the thermostat dial alone.

Control every heating device with an appropriately rated thermostat; guard hot elements inside the enclosure. Avoid hot rocks and unregulated heat mats. Low-output UVB can be offered with proper distance, shade and a timed day cycle.

Do not leave visible bright lights on overnight. Do not close ventilation to force humidity upward.

5. Substrate, Water and Cleaning

Choose a clean reptile-safe substrate suited to the exact species and room humidity, such as aspen, cypress or paper products. Avoid cedar, pine, scented bedding and dusty material. Paper is useful during quarantine or illness.

• Refresh clean water daily; scrub the bowl weekly or when soiled.

• Spot-clean droppings, urates, shed and wet substrate promptly.

• Clean the enclosure and furnishings with a reptile-safe product, then rinse and dry completely. Keep the snake away from fumes.

• Do not mix cleaning chemicals. Wash hands before and after handling the snake, enclosure or prey.

Reptiles may carry Salmonella while appearing healthy. Keep equipment away from food-preparation spaces, wash hands, and supervise children.

6. Feeding and Nutrition

Offer appropriately sized whole frozen-thawed rodents, usually mice and in some cases rats for larger individuals. Prey width should be close to but not greater than the snake’s widest body area; the exact size and schedule depend on age, species and body condition.

• Growing juveniles commonly eat about every 5-7 days.

• Many adults eat about every 7-14 days; avoid overfeeding and track body condition.

• Thaw prey in a sealed container in the refrigerator, then warm it before offering. Do not microwave or leave prey out for a long time.

• Use feeding tongs, not fingers. Remove uneaten prey promptly. Frozen-thawed prey avoids bites and serious injury from live rodents.

Keep a feeding log and avoid handling for at least 24-48 hours after a meal to reduce regurgitation risk.

7. Water, Bathing and Shedding

Clean water must always be available. Some kingsnakes voluntarily soak, so use a heavy bowl large enough for the animal to choose to enter. Voluntary soaking can be normal.

A healthy kingsnake does not need scheduled baths. Forced soaking can be stressful and will not fix poor humidity, mites, dehydration or illness. If a veterinarian advises a soak, use shallow lukewarm water in a secure tub and supervise continuously. No soap, oils or salts.

Before a shed, the snake may look dull, have cloudy eyes, hide more or refuse food. Maintain the species' normal conditions and offer a clean humid hide if needed.

• After the shed, visually check the eye caps and tail tip.

• Never peel shed or pull eye caps. Ask a reptile vet about retained skin or repeated incomplete sheds.

Persistent soaking or incomplete shedding may signal a husbandry or health problem; check measurements and seek veterinary advice.

8. Handling and Food Response

Let a new snake settle and establish feeding before routine handling, usually about 1-2 weeks unless the veterinarian advises otherwise. Move slowly, support the body and keep sessions short at first.

• A kingsnake may mistake movement or a warm hand for food. Use a consistent cue before opening the enclosure and avoid reaching in with prey-scented hands.

• Do not grab from above or pull a snake roughly from a hide. Do not handle during shed, illness, or soon after feeding.

• Wash hands before and after handling. Avoid handling after touching rodents.

• If the snake is defensive or strikes, pause and review stress, temperature, feeding routine and enclosure security.

Never handle a snake over stairs, near a hot stove or where a fall could injure it.

9. Children and Other Household Pets

Kingsnakes should be handled only by a responsible adult or under direct adult supervision. Children should not squeeze, chase, kiss or carry the snake around the home.

Dogs, cats, birds and other reptiles should not have direct contact with the snake. Secure the enclosure in a room where other animals cannot paw at it, tip it or stress the snake.

• Use a lockable enclosure and keep the snake out of kitchens and food spaces.

• Do not allow free-roaming around the house; snakes can escape, chill, be stepped on or encounter toxins.

• Wash hands after touching the animal or enclosure. People at higher risk of severe Salmonella illness should follow clinician advice.

10. Health Warning Signs

Contact a reptile veterinarian for wheezing, open-mouth breathing, bubbles or discharge, repeated regurgitation, persistent diarrhea, blood, swelling, mouth redness, sores, mites, burns, retained eye caps or weight loss.

Urgent signs include labored breathing, prolapse, severe weakness, significant bleeding, suspected burn or inability to move normally.

• Keep the snake in its normal measured temperature gradient while arranging care; do not overheat it.

• Bring photos of the enclosure and equipment, temperature/humidity readings, feeding and weight records, and a fresh stool sample if available.

• Do not give human medication, leftover antibiotics, vitamins or home remedies. Do not force-feed.

A single missed meal can have several causes; repeated refusal, weight loss or other symptoms should be assessed by a reptile veterinarian.

11. Veterinary Care and Prevention

Arrange an initial exam with a reptile-experienced veterinarian soon after adoption. Many practices recommend annual preventive visits; ask about fecal parasite screening and follow the vet’s interval for your snake. Routine vaccines are not generally used for pet snakes.

• Ask whether the veterinarian regularly sees snakes and kingsnakes.

• Bring feeding, shed, stool and weight records, enclosure photos and exact thermostat, heat and UVB details.

• Plan transport in a secure, ventilated container and identify an emergency clinic before one is needed.

• Weigh periodically and track body condition; avoid rapid growth or obesity.

The treating veterinarian should tailor care to the exact kingsnake species and individual health history.

12. Cost Planning

Expense	Approximate U.S. range	Notes
Adult enclosure and locks	$150-$500+	Large or custom builds cost more
Heat, thermostat and meters	$80-$200+	Reliable temperature control is essential
Hides, water bowl, substrate, decor	$40-$150	May need replacement and upgrades
Initial complete setup	$300-$900+	Before animal purchase
Prey and routine consumables	$15-$50/month	Varies by snake size and delivery
Routine reptile exam	$75-$250+	Tests and treatment cost extra
Emergency reserve	$500-$1,500+	Serious illness can exceed this

These are broad U.S. estimates as of November 2026, not quotes. Prices vary by city, enclosure type, electricity, prey delivery and veterinary needs. Ask local exotic clinics for exam and fecal-testing prices.

Include power-outage supplies, secure transport, replacement bulbs and an emergency fund in the plan. A low purchase price does not reduce the long-term cost of care.

13. Travel and Long-Term Planning

Kingsnakes can live for many years. Plan for adult-sized housing, recurring prey, routine vet care, travel coverage, moves and potential changes in household circumstances.

Before travel, have a responsible adult check temperature, water and locks. Do not ask an inexperienced sitter to alter thermostat settings or handle the snake unnecessarily.

During a power failure, keep doors closed and follow a safe backup heating plan approved by a reptile veterinarian. Never put the animal directly on a heat pad or hot water bottle.

Keep breeder/rescue papers and verify rules before moving across state lines. Never release a pet snake outdoors.

14. Checklist and Sources

Care routine

Daily	Check warm/cool temperatures, humidity, thermostat, lock, water and animal; spot-clean.
Feeding day	Offer appropriately sized frozen-thawed prey; record response; avoid handling afterward.
Weekly	Clean bowl and visible surfaces; inspect hides, substrate and secure furnishings.
Monthly	Record weight/body condition; check thermostats, probes, cords, locks and light equipment.

Book named by the owner

Marvin Murkett and Ben Team, *King Snakes as Pets: King Snakes Comprehensive Owner's Guide* (ISBN 9781910410264). This guide is original educational writing and does not reproduce the book.

ReptiFiles, Kingsnake Care - housing, heat, humidity, feeding and solitary housing.

RSPCA, Kingsnake Care - environment, feeding, shedding and warning signs.

VCA Animal Hospitals, New Reptile Visit - initial veterinary examination.

Merck Veterinary Manual, Reptile Husbandry - sanitation, housing and feeding prey safely.

Care varies by kingsnake species. Confirm the scientific name and follow an experienced reptile veterinarian's advice. This guide is educational and does not diagnose illness.