



Gray-Banded Kingsnakes

Lampropeltis alterna

INTERMEDIATE · 3–4 FT ADULT · 15–20 YR LIFESPAN · NOCTURNAL · TEXAS & MEXICO

Ask a room of snake keepers which North American colubrid they'd cross a state line to buy, and gray-bandeds come up fast. They're small, secretive rock-country kingsnakes out of Texas and Mexico, patterned like nothing else in the genus. The honest headline: this is a second-snake species, not a first one, and the reason is food. A gray-banded that eats readily is easy. One that doesn't will test you.

AT A GLANCE	
Difficulty	Intermediate
Ambient temps	75–82 °F, 65–72 °F night
Basking spot	85–88 °F
Humidity	30–50%
UVB	Low levels beneficial
Diet	Carnivore: mice, lizards
Feeding cadence	Every 7–10 days
Adult size	3–4 feet
Lifespan	15–20 years



Captive-bred gray-banded kingsnakes are an NARBC show staple. Ask the breeder what the animal is eating before you ask about pattern.

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01

The Intermediate Label Is Earned

Gray-bandeds are night animals with a nervous streak. They spend daylight jammed into a rock crevice or a tight hide and come out after dark, which means a well-built enclosure often looks empty. Handling is tolerated, not enjoyed: keep sessions short, support the whole body, and read a fast, flighty snake as startled rather than mean. The intermediate label is about feeding and observation, not attitude.

02

Housing by Life Stage

Floor space beats height for a crevice dweller. Hatchlings start at 16×8×8, and adults want 36×18×12 as a minimum, 48×18×18 if you have the room. Racks work through subadult; a grown alterna does better front-opening. Give two tight hides, warm side and cool, plus slate or cork to wedge under. Latch everything twice, because kingsnakes find gaps. And **house them one to an enclosure**: *Lampropeltis* eat other snakes, including their own kind.

STAGE	MINIMUM	PREFERRED	NOTES
Hatchling	16×8×8	20×12×12	Notoriously hard first feeders; lizard-scented pinkies often needed.
Juvenile	20×12×12	24×18×12	Secretive: give tight hides it can wedge into, not open caves.
Subadult	24×18×12	36×18×12	Grows slower than other <i>Lampropeltis</i> ; be patient with size upgrades.
Adult	36×18×12	48×18×18	Dry, rocky habitat mimic; racks only conditionally suit a grown alterna.

Minimums and preferred footprints from Habitat-OS life-stage guidance; inches, floor space before height.

03

Heat, Light and the Night Drop

Run a gradient: 75–82 °F ambient with a warm surface of 85–88 °F, on a thermostat, never a heat rock. Overhead heat and under-tank heat both work here. What matters is that a probe controls the source, and that you read the surface the snake actually presses against, inside the hide. Let the enclosure fall to 65–72 °F overnight; that drop is part of the picture, not a failure. Low UVB is beneficial rather than mandatory, and a steady day-night cycle costs you nothing.

04

Dry Air, Full Bowl

This is a dry-country snake: 30–50% humidity, with ventilation that actually moves air. Standing damp is the enemy, and soaked bedding under a warm spot is how you get blistered bellies and a respiratory infection. Keep the water bowl full anyway, because dry air and no water are two different things. One humid hide with damp sphagnum carries the animal through a shed, and stuck shed usually means it wasn't there.

05

Substrate and Rockwork

Aspen, a soil-and-sand blend, or plain paper for quarantine and problem feeders. Skip loose sand for hatchlings and juveniles; small snakes and loose grit are an impaction risk not worth taking. Set rockwork on the enclosure floor rather than on top of the bedding, and anchor anything a snake could tunnel under and topple. Slate, cork bark and a couple of branches give a nocturnal animal reasons to move. Clutter is enrichment here.

06

Feeding, and the Catch

Grown gray-bandeds are straightforward rodent feeders: one appropriately sized mouse every 7–10 days. The trouble is the start. This species also takes lizards in the wild, and hatchlings are notoriously difficult first feeders that often need pinkies scented with lizard before they commit. Buy from a breeder who can tell you the last few meals, and take the animal already eating unscented rodents. Feed after dark, then leave it alone.

07

Health Red Flags

The scale tells you first. A gray-banded that stops eating and drops weight warns you weeks before it looks thin, so weigh monthly and log it. A refused meal in a picky species is normal; refusals plus steady weight loss are not. Watch for regurgitation, mites at the eye rim and chin, and stuck shed on the tail tip. Open-mouth breathing, gaping or bubbling at the nostrils means respiratory infection until a vet rules it out, and that visit can't wait.

Husbandry data: Habitat-OS species library. Structure follows the NARBC show handout series. Every animal is an individual - when in doubt, ask the breeder at the table or a reptile veterinarian.