



California King Snake

Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Subphylum: Vertebrata
Class: Reptilia
Order: Squamata
Family: Colubridae
Genus: *Lampropeltis*
Species: *getula californiae*



Photo courtesy of Karen Marzynski

Habitat

- **In the Wild:** The California king snake is found throughout California, except the damp redwood zone of the extreme northwest coast and the northeast corner. It also ranges into parts of Oregon, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Mexico, and Baja California. It is found in a wide variety of habitats: forests, woodlands, chaparrals, grasslands, marshes, farmlands, ranches, deserts, and even brushy suburban areas.
- **Exhibit Location:** Zoo to You Collection

Characteristics

- Length: 2.5-4 feet
- The California king snake has smooth, shiny appearing scales that can be ringed, striped, spotted, or any combination of those. There are 2 phases, one with the stripes going across the body (like the one we have), and the other with a stripe going down the body from the head to the tail.
- They can be any shade of black or brown, with a lighter color of white or yellow. The head is dark on top with a light area on the center rear.
- **Lifespan: In the Wild** unknown; **In Captivity** 33 years

Behaviors

- The California king snake is diurnal (active during the daytime), but when it is hot, they can occasionally become nocturnal (active at night).
- They are mostly terrestrial (ground dwellers), but they will climb low branches and shrubs.
- California king snakes are usually solitary animals except when they hibernate during cold weather.
- When disturbed, California king snakes can give off a strong musk odor. They will often smear an aggressor with fecal matter when handled. It also occasionally vibrates its tail quickly, hisses, and rolls into a ball, hiding its head as a defense posture.
- They use constriction to subdue their prey and are capable of swallowing a whole rattlesnake while it is still alive.
- **Enrichments at the Zoo:** change enclosure furniture, handling by keeper staff

Reproduction

- California king snakes reach sexual maturity at 3-4 years of age.
- Mating occurs between the months of May and August after which 2-24 eggs are laid.
- Incubation is 47-81 days.
- Hatchlings are about 12 inches when born and are completely on their own after hatching.

Diet

- **In the Wild:** mammals, small turtles, birds and their eggs, reptile eggs, other snakes, lizards, frogs
- **At the Zoo:** mice

Conservation Status

- **IUCN status:** not listed; **CITES Appendix:** not listed
- California king snakes are common in their natural habitat.
- Humans benefit from king snakes because of their role in the ecosystem. King snakes control rodent and frog populations, in addition to killing rattlesnakes. Besides these benefits to humans, common king snakes are also used in the pet trade.
- Predators: hawks, coyotes, other snakes (including king snakes), humans

Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- King snakes earned their name by preying on other snakes. Thus, they are considered the “king” of the snakes.
- Many custom color phases have been bred, including albinos.
- California king snakes have a tolerance to rattlesnake venom.

Sources:

- Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens, (2008). Bio facts: California kingsnake. Retrieved May 14, 2008, from Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens Web site: <http://www.jaxzoo.org/animals/biofacts/CaliforniaKingsnake.asp>
- Poindexter, J. 2001. “Lampropeltis getula” (on-line), Animal Diversity Web. Accessed January 29, 2008 at http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/site/accounts/information/Lampropeltis_getula.html.
- Santa Barbara Zoo, (2006). Animals: California king snake. Retrieved May 14, 2008, from Santa Barbara Zoo Web site: <http://www.santabarbarazoo.org/showAnimals.asp?id=246>