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## California Kingsnake - *Lampropeltis californiae*

(Blainville, 1835)

(= *Lampropeltis getula californiae*)

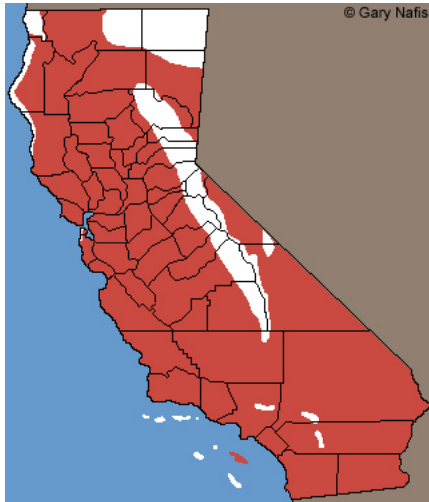
Pictures and information about this snake and its habitat have been put on three pages:

Page 1, this page, shows to see pictures of the more common banded form of the California Kingsnake, plus a range map, a species description and natural history information, references, and links to more information.

[Page 2](#) illustrates naturally-occurring aberrant morph California Kingsnakes.

[Page 3](#) shows some of the wide variety of habitats utilized by this snake.

Search this web site



Range in California: Red

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Report Your Herp  
Observations



Brown and cream adult, Santa Clara County © James Rowe



Black and cream sub-adult,  
Kings County



Brown and cream adult, Yuba County



Black and white desert phase adult,  
Inyo County desert



Black and cream adult, San Diego County mountains



Black and cream adult,  
eastern Alameda County



Black and cream adult, Inyo County



Adult, desert phase, Riverside County  
desert © Jeremiah Easter



Brown and cream adult, Lake County



Dark brown and cream adult,  
coastal San Luis Obispo County

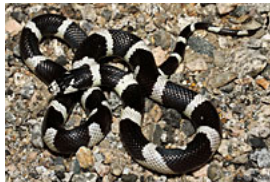


Dark brown and pale yellow adult, Yuba County





Dark brown and cream juvenile, western Riverside County



Dark brown and pale yellow adult, Alameda County



Black and white desert phase adult, San Diego County desert

Black and white desert phase adult, Inyo County



A brown and cream banded morph adult from the Diablo Range in Santa Clara County © [Holly Lane](#)

A slightly faded Brown and Cream banded morph from the Santa Clara County mountains © [Holly Lane](#)



Black and cream adult, coastal Monterey County

Adult, Alameda County © [Mark Gary](#)  
When encountered in th field, most wild California Kingsnakes don't often become defensive by assuming a threatening posture and striking, as this one did.

Black and cream adult, El Dorado County  
© [Richard Porter](#)

Black and cream adult, Southern Monterey County  
© [Benjamin German](#)

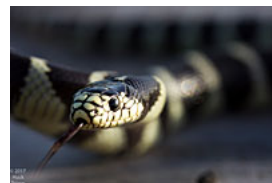


Adult, Shasta County  
© [Luke Talltree](#)

Black and cream adult, Santa Cruz County © [Zachary Lim](#)

Adult, Kern County desert © [Ryan Sikola](#)

Adult, Santa Cruz County  
© [Jared Heald](#)



Adult swimming across stream, Orange County © [Nicholas Hess](#)

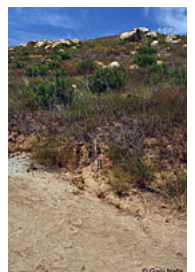
Adult, Solano County  
© [Lou Silva](#)

Juvenile, Los Angeles County  
© [Huck Triggs](#)

© Don Sterba



Adult from the Los Angeles County coast with 40 bands © [Don Sterba](#)





The everted hemipenes of a male California Kingsnake. © [Patrick Briggs](#)

Adult in defensive pose with everted vent, Big Sur, Monterey County

California Kingsnake tracks on a dusty road in San Diego County. At 1 PM on a sunny 80 degree day in early June, a California Kingsnake crossed this road. After a short photo session, it crawled away, leaving this track.

#### California Kingsnakes in either Combat or Courtship

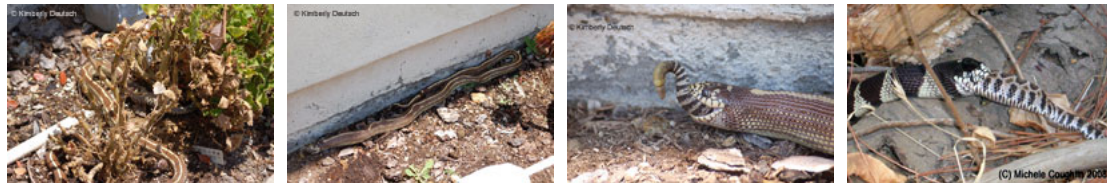


These two adult California Kingsnakes were found on a back porch at the end of April in San Diego County. It is not possible to determine what they are doing - they could be a male and a female in courting behavior preliminary to copulation, or they could be two males in combat, although not very aggressively.



These three **short videos** show the same two snakes depicted in the stills above.

#### California Kingsnakes Feeding and Predation



A striped phase California Kingsnake eating a juvenile Southern Pacific Rattlesnake in San Diego County. © [Kimberly Deutsch](#)

Sacramento County adult eating a juvenile Northern Pacific Rattlesnake. © [Michele Coughlin](#)



This striped California Kingsnake is eating a [San Diego Alligator Lizard](#) in San Diego County. © [Liz Samperi](#)



California Kingsnakes are powerful predators capable of eating other snakes almost as large as they are. Here you can see one eating a Gophersnake. © [Patrick Briggs](#)



Adult eating a lizard, Santa Catalina Island. © [Nathan Smith](#)



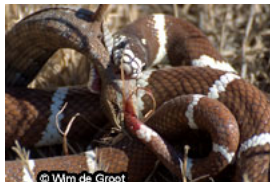
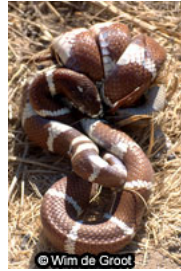
[Stacy Holt](#) with Death Valley National Park sent me the above six photos which were taken on 8/28/13 by National Park Service Employees [Drew Kaiser](#) and [Shannon Mazzei](#). Drew and Shannon saw the snakes struggling at around 11 AM in near Towne Pass. A California Kingsnake was wrapped tightly around a [Panamint Rattlesnake](#) and the snakes were barely moving. Disturbed by the onlookers, the kingsnake retreated under a nearby bush. The rattlesnake was dead by that time, and appears to be biting itself, but was described as biting onto the kingsnake before it died. The kingsnake probably returned to swallow the rattlesnake after the people left. You can see other interesting wildlife sightings on the [Death Valley National Park Facebook Page](#).



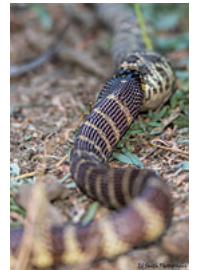
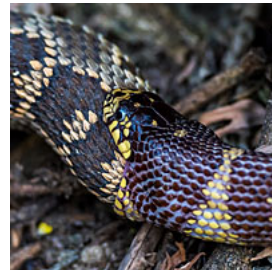


Contra Costa County adult killing a [Pacific Gophersnake](#) for dinner. © [Tim Dayton](#)

This California Kingsnake was discovered eating a juvenile Southern Pacific Rattlesnake in the Los Padres Mountains, Santa Barbara County © [Benjamin Brunz](#)



This California Kingsnake was observed battling a [California Alligator Lizard](#) on a hiking trail in Santa Clara County. The alligator lizard clamped its jaws down on the snake's tail and held on tight even after it died. The snake had to pull and thrash about for more than 20 minutes before the lizard let go of the badly-damaged tail, finally allowing the snake to swallow it. © [Wim de Groot](#)

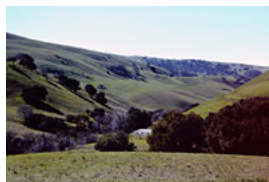


A California Kingsnake eating a [Southern Pacific Rattlesnake](#) in Orange County © [Ed Smith](#)



Adult snake looking for food in a bird nest box in Sonoma County  
© [John McClain](#)

#### Naturally-Occurring Aberrant Morphs and Habitat



Go to [Page 2](#) to see some other naturally-occurring aberrant morphs of California Kingsnakes.

Go to [Page 3](#) to see pictures of some of the wide variety of habitats inhabited by California Kingsnakes.

#### Short Videos of Banded Kingsnakes

(Videos of Striped and Aberrant Kingsnakes [Here](#))



A very large banded kingsnake crawls off a road and up onto a rock face in a Kern County desert canyon at night.



A kingsnake crawls very quickly across the Colorado desert at night in San Diego County.



A beautiful banded adult California Kingsnake crosses a road at night in Alameda County, reminding me that my favorite thing about an encounter with a snake is watching it crawl away.



A distressed San Diego County California Kingsnake vibrates its tail.



Click on the picture above to watch a YouTube video of a defensive California Kingsnake, sent to me by Paivi Kangas.

#### Description

**Not Dangerous** (Non-poisonous) - This snake does not have venom that is dangerous to most humans.

#### Size

California Kingsnakes seldom exceed 48 inches. (122 cm). Most commonly found at 2.5 - 3.5 feet in length (76 - 107 cm). Hatchlings are about 12 inches long (30.5 cm).

#### Appearance

Smooth, shiny, unkeeled scales.  
The head is barely wider than the neck.

#### Color and Pattern

Highly variable in appearance.

Most commonly seen with alternating bands of black or brown and white or light yellow, including the underside, where the light bands become wider.

Many unusual color phases have been bred, including albinos.

In his book, "Common Kingsnakes, A Natural History of *Lampropeltis getula*" 2009, Brian Hubbs includes a list of more than 30 prominent aberrant color patterns found in California Kingsnakes. The map shown to the left shows the approximate location for all of these morphs combined in southern California, with the "Delta" and "Eiseni" morphs shown to the north in the central valleys. For much more detailed information about these morphs than I show here, including maps showing some known locations for many of these morphs, consult the book. You can see pictures of some of them, and a map of where they occur, on my [Aberrant Morphs](#) page.

A striped phase with a white or light yellow stripe on the back occurs in coastal southern California.

An unbanded phase with a dark belly and lateral striping occurs in the northern San Joaquin Valley and southern Sacramento Valley.

A dark banded phase with a dark underside occurs in coastal Los Angeles County, some with a high number of bands.

A desert phase occurs with dark black bands and narrow bright white bands.

Some variants have much dark speckling in the light bands, others with much light speckling in the dark bands.

#### Life History and Behavior

##### Activity

Active during daylight in cooler weather and at night, dawn, and dusk when temperatures are high.

##### Defense

When disturbed, generally not aggressive, but sometimes [vibrates the tail quickly](#), hisses, and rolls into a ball, hiding the head and showing the vent with it's lining exposed.

Immune to rattlesnake venom.

##### Diet and Feeding

Eats a wide variety of prey, including rodents and other small mammals, lizards, lizard eggs, snakes (including rattlesnakes), snake eggs, turtle eggs and hatchlings, frogs, salamanders, birds, bird eggs and chicks, and large invertebrates.

A powerful constrictor, coiling tightly around its prey.

##### Breeding

Snakes reach sexual maturity in 3 - 4 years.

California Kingsnakes are ovoviparous, laying eggs that incubate then hatch.

Breeding generally takes place within a few weeks of emergence from hibernation, usually after the first shed, but some snakes wait longer to breed. (Desert snakes probably breed much earlier while high-elevation snakes probably breed later.)

Male Combat has been observed within the genus: In a description of the Speckled King Snake (based on Carpenter and Gillingham 1977 - *A Combat Ritual Between Two Male Speckled Kingsnakes*. SW Nat. 22(4): 517-524) Werler and Dixon, 2000, say that males engage in lively combat during the breeding season or when they are competing for food or territory. The males lie stretched out with their bodies entwined, each one trying to get on top of the other to dominate his rival. In the later stage of combat biting may occur. Usually the larger snake is victorious and the second snake crawls away or assumes a submissive position with his head held flat against the ground.

Courtship behavior between a male and a female involves neck-biting to hold the female during copulation. (Hubbs, 2009)

1 to 2 months after breeding (averaging 6 weeks) females lay from 3 - 24 eggs (average clutch size is probably 8 - 10 for the species) (Hubbs, 2009).

Egg laying occurs generally between May and August.  
Eggs hatch in 6 weeks to 2 months (earlier in warmer temperatures, and later in cooler temperatures.) (Hubbs, 2009)

Habitat

Found in a wide variety of habitats - forest, woodland, chaparral, grassland, marshes, farmland, ranches, deserts, and even brushy suburban areas.

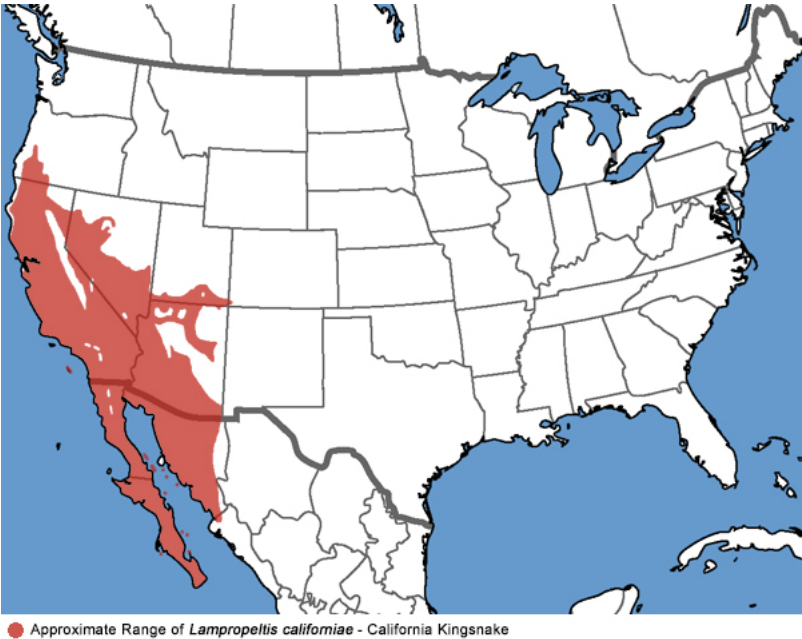
Geographical Range

*Lampropeltis californiae* is found throughout most of California, but is absent from the damp redwood zone of the extreme northwest coast, the northeast great basin desert, and high elevations in the Sierra Nevada and other mountain ranges.

Outside of California, it occurs in southwestern Oregon, Nevada, southern Utah,extreme southwestern Colorado, much of Arizona, throughout Baja California, including several islands, and most of Sonora, Mexico.

An introduced population occurs on Gran Canaria Island in the Canary Islands, where there are no native snakes.

The former species *Lampropeltis getula* - Common Kingsnake was split into 5 species. That former species occurred in a very wide range, from the Pacific Coast, to Florida, including most of the southern part of the U. S., south into Mexico.  
*L. getula* now only occurs on the east coast south through Florida.  
*L. nigra* occurs from southern Illinois, Indiana and Ohio, south to the Gulf of Mexico east of the Mississippi River and roughly west of the Appalachian mountains.  
*L. holbrookii* occurs west of the Mississippi River east to the Pecos River and south of the Rio Grande into Mexico.  
*L. splendida* occurs in the Texas Big Bend region, parts of southern New Mexico, and an isolated area in northeastern Arizona.



Elevational Range

Found at elevations from sea level to 7,100 ft. (2164 m). in the eastern Sierra Nevada. and up to 6077 ft. (1852.3 m.) in the Southern California mountains (Herpetological Review 44(2), 2013).

Notes on Taxonomy

In 2009 Pyron and Burbrink elevated several subspecies of *Lampropeltis getula* to full species status, including:

- L. g. californiae* to *L. californiae* - California Kingsnake
- L. g. getula* to *L. getula* - Eastern Kingsnake
- L. g. holbrookii* to *L. holbrookii* - Speckled Kingsnake
- L. g. nigra* to *L. nigra* - Eastern Black Kingsnake

Pyron, R.A. & Burbrink, F.T. (2009a) Neogene diversification and taxonomic stability in the snake tribe Lampropeltini (Serpentes: Colubridae). Molecular Phylogenetics and Evolution, 52, 524–529.

R. Alexander Pyron, & Frank T. Burbrink. Systematics of the Common Kingsnake (*Lampropeltis getula*; Serpentes: Colubridae) and the burden of heritage in taxonomy. Zootaxa 2241: 22–32. Copyright © 2009 · Magnolia Press.

Alternate and Previous Names (Synonyms)

- L. getulus californiae* - California Kingsnake (Stebbins 1966, 2003, 2012)
- L. getulus californiae* - California King Snake (Ditmars 1907)
- L. getulus californiae* - California King Snake (Stebbins 1954)
- California Milk Snake (Van Denburgh 1897)
- Banded King Snake; Blainville's King Snake (Yarrow 1882)
- (California) Striped King Snake; Fresno King Snake

Conservation Issues (Conservation Status)

None

Taxonomy

Family	Colubridae	Colubrids	Oppel, 1811
Genus	<i>Lampropeltis</i>	Kingsnakes and Milksnakes	Fitzinger, 1843
Species	<i>californiae</i>	California Kingsnake	(Blainville, 1835)

Original Description

*Lampropeltis getula californiae* - (Blainville, 1835) - Nouv. Ann. Mus. Hist. Nat. Paris, Vol. 4, p. 292, pl. 27, fig. 1

from [Original Description Citations for the Reptiles and Amphibians of North America](#) © Ellin Beltz

#### Meaning of the Scientific Name

*Lampropeltis* - Greek - *lampros* - shiny and *pelta* - shield - referring to the smooth, shiny dorsal scales characteristic of this genus  
*californiae* - of the state of California - which includes most of the range of this subspecies.

mostly from [Scientific and Common Names of the Reptiles and Amphibians of North America - Explained](#) © Ellin Beltz

#### Related or Similar California Snakes

*L. zonata* - [California Mountain Kingsnake](#)  
*R. l. lecontei* - [Western Long-nosed Snake](#)  
*C. occipitalis* - [Mojave Shovel-nosed Snake](#)

#### More Information and References

[California Department of Fish and Wildlife](#)

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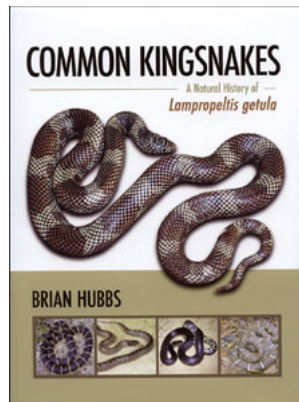
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Ernst, Carl H., Evelyn M. Ernst, & Robert M. Corker. *Snakes of the United States and Canada*. Smithsonian Institution Press, 2003.

Wright, Albert Hazen & Anna Allen Wright. *Handbook of Snakes of the United States and Canada*. Cornell University Press, 1957.

[Southern California Kingsnakes](#) - A Website Dedicated to All Cal King Enthusiasts

Dixon, James R. and John E. Werler. *Texas Snakes, Identification, Distribution, and Natural History*. University of Texas Press, Austin Texas, 2000



Hubbs, Brian. [Common Kingsnakes](#),  
[A Natural History of Lampropeltis getula](#). 2009.

#### Conservation Status

The following status listings are copied from the April 2018 Special Animals List and the 2017 Endangered and Threatened Animals List, both of which are published by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

If no status is listed here, the animal is not included on either CDFW list. This most likely indicates that there are no serious conservation concerns for the animal. To find out more about an animal's status, you can go to the NatureServe and IUCN websites to check their rankings.

Check [here](#) to see the most current complete lists.

This snake is not included on the Special Animals List, which indicates that there are no significant conservation concerns for it in California.

#### Organization

#### Status Listing

NatureServe Global Ranking	
NatureServe State Ranking	
U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA)	None
California Endangered Species Act (CESA)	None
California Department of Fish and Wildlife	None
Bureau of Land Management	None
USDA Forest Service	None
IUCN	

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