

King Snake *Lampropeltis getula* and Milk Snake *Lampropeltis triangulum* **Care Plan**

King snakes, from North America, have 7-10 subspecies with extremely variable patterning.

Milk snakes, with 25 subspecies, are one of the most widely distributed of all terrestrial snakes, ranging from South-eastern Canada to Colombia and Ecuador. They vary in length from 50cm (Scarlet king snake) to 2m (Ecuadorian milk snake), with most having the distinctive red, black and yellow banding.

These snakes are primarily terrestrial, occupying a variety of habitats including woodland, farmland and grassland, and are nocturnal. They lay clutches of 3-24 eggs and can be powerful constrictors. They are very similar in their requirements to pine snakes (*Pituophis* spp.).

Suitability as Pets

They are very hardy and can be expected to live for approximately 15 – 20 years, making them an excellent choice for a pet snake.

Sexing & Reproduction

Breeding is pretty straight forward. A 2-3 month cooling down period with temperatures ranging from 50-60 is required in order to breed this species. Breeding usually takes place from May to late June with anywhere from 6-20 eggs being laid from June to August. Incubation in this species lasts from 55-62 days.

Juvenile Care

For the first 8 months or so, juveniles can be kept in small plastic containers with ventilation holes covered by mesh in the lids. Place a third of the container only on a heat mat or strip. Kitchen paper can be used as a cheap substrate. Provide a hide box and a shallow water dish.

Housing

King and milk snakes require a warm, escape-proof vivarium with the correct temperature gradient and places to hide. The vivarium must be secure as these species have a reputation for escaping!

A vivarium 100cm long x 40cm high x 40cm wide is suitable for most adults. Faecal material should be removed as soon as possible and the entire vivarium cleaned and disinfected every 2-3 months.

It is essential that vivarium temperature and humidity are monitored to ensure that your snake is living in the correct environment for the species. Ideally thermometers should be placed at each end of the vivarium.

Good ventilation is essential.

Keep records of feeding and shedding dates, passing of urates and faeces, weights and any veterinary care.

Lighting

No special lighting is required and a 12 hour day/night photoperiod is suitable.

Heating/ Temperature

The vivarium temperature should be 24-32°C during the day, with a night-time drop of a few degrees. There should be a temperature gradient from one end of the enclosure to the other, enabling the snake to regulate its own temperature by moving around. This is best achieved by placing a heat mat or tape under or against the side of the vivarium at one end. A low wattage spot light can be used as a basking lamp. Lights and heaters inside the vivarium must be guarded to prevent direct contact by the snake. Use a thermostat to control the heat system if possible. Hot rocks are not recommended.

Furniture (Climbing and shelter)

Provide a hide box or log, and a shallow water dish large enough for total immersion at the cooler end. Vertical climbing areas are recommended. Newspaper, Astroturf, outdoor carpeting, or peat are all suitable substrates. An object with an abrasive surface such as a piece of bark should be provided to facilitate shedding of the skin.

Water /Humidity

Humidity should range from 50-60%. Regular light misting may help to keep the humidity at the correct level. This is particularly important when the snake is shedding when humidity should be high.

Fresh water should be provided at least every 2 days.

Diet / Feeding

In the wild king and milk snakes eat small mammals, birds, amphibians, lizards and even other snakes. In captivity they can be easily maintained on a diet of defrosted mice and weaner rats. In general they should be fed every 5-7 days, with younger snakes being fed more frequently than older ones. Start feeding hatchlings with pinkies after their first shed and feed every 2-5 days. If snakes are kept in pairs or groups, they should be separated for feeding.

Reluctant feeders can be encouraged by wiggling the mouse with a pair of forceps, warming it or by washing the mouse and scenting it by rubbing against a chick, a shed lizard skin, or by placing it in a small cardboard box recently vacated by a live rodent.

A snake may not eat if the environmental conditions are unsuitable, if it is about to shed, if it is stressed (for example by excessive handling or lack of a hiding place) or if it has a medical problem.

Food Dusting/ Vitamin Supplementation

No specific supplementation is required.

Preventative Care & Disease Management

Quarantine all new snakes for at least 3 months. During this time record normal patterns of eating, defaecating, weight gain and behaviour and have them examined by a vet.

It is a good idea to take along a fresh faecal sample so that the vet can check for the presence of gastrointestinal parasites such as worms or protozoa.

If your snake shows any signs of illness such as regurgitation, abnormal body position, decreased appetite or abnormal respiration it should be examined by a vet as soon as possible.

Accidents and injuries can happen, both to the reptile and the reptile handler. Not only can bites happen, but also there are diseases that can be transmitted between animals - and that means between reptiles and humans.

Keepers should be ware of the prevention of reptile associated salmonellosis (RAS).

Good hygiene is essential, not only to your pet's health, but to your own.

Reptiles can be non- symptomatic carriers of Salmonella, bacteria that cause sometimes lethal food poisoning.

Children, the aged, and those who are immune-compromised are particularly susceptible to Salmonella from any source.

There are measures you can take to minimize risk:

- After handling your pet reptile, wash your hands with soap for at least 30 seconds, or use hand disinfectant.
- Disinfect any area you used to clean cages, dishes and do not use this area for food preparation.
- Use separate cleaning utensils, not the sponge you use to wash your own dishes.
- Reptiles are NOT recommended if you're pregnant or have a young child or an immunocompromised person in your home.
- Don't kiss a reptile pet.

Further information on husbandry can be found at:

Books