

CALIFORNIA KINGSLAKE CARE GUIDE

Lampropeltis californiae

Bay Area Bird & Exotics Hospital

☎ 415-566-4359 ✉ reception@birdandexoticvet.com

California kingsnakes are active, curious, and hardy — one of the most popular pet snakes for good reason. They are beautiful, manageable in size, and become genuinely tame with regular handling. They are also notorious escape artists who treat enclosure lids as a personal challenge. Secure latches are not optional.

📖 NATURAL HISTORY

Stat	Detail
Scientific name	<i>Lampropeltis californiae</i>
Adult size	3–4 feet, occasionally up to 5 feet
Lifespan	15–20+ years with proper care
Temperament	Curious and active — may be defensive when young but typically settles with regular handling

📖 HOUSING

Life Stage	Minimum Enclosure Size
Juvenile	20-gallon tank or equivalent
Adult	40-gallon tank or larger — minimum 36" × 18" floor space

- Escape-proof enclosure with tight-fitting lids and secure latches — kingsnakes are notorious escape artists and will find any gap
- Safe substrate: aspen shavings, paper-based bedding, or reptile carpet — avoid cedar or pine
- Provide at least two hides — one on the warm side, one on the cool side
- Add branches, logs, and artificial plants for enrichment and environmental complexity

📖 TEMPERATURE & HUMIDITY

Zone	Temperature
Warm side	85–88°F
Cool side	72–78°F
Nighttime	68–72°F

Humidity	40–60% — moderate
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- Use an under-tank heater or heat tape controlled by a thermostat — thermostat regulation is essential to prevent thermal burns
- **Never use heat rocks** — serious burn risk
- Provide a water dish large enough for soaking — especially important during shedding periods

☀ LIGHTING

- UVB is not strictly required for California kingsnakes — but a low-output UVB bulb (2–5%) is beneficial for overall health and natural behavior
- Maintain a consistent day/night cycle: **10–12 hours** of light daily — use a timer for reliability

🐞 DIET & FEEDING

- Feed **pre-killed (frozen/thawed)** mice or small rats only — live prey is unnecessary and poses an injury risk to the snake
- Prey size: approximately as wide as the snake’s thickest point
- Always use tongs to offer prey — never use hands to present food directly
- Feed outside the enclosure if your snake tends to strike at movement inside — this also helps prevent the snake from associating its home environment with feeding
- Never handle within 48 hours after feeding — this causes regurgitation

Life Stage	Feeding Frequency
Hatchling / juvenile	Every 5–7 days
Adult	Every 10–14 days

🐍 HANDLING

- Begin handling once your kingsnake is eating reliably and has settled into its enclosure
- Handle gently and confidently, supporting the snake’s entire body at all times
- Defensive behavior when young is normal and typically resolves with calm, consistent handling over time
- **Musking** — releasing a smelly liquid when startled — is a normal defense response and usually decreases with regular handling. It washes off.
- Limit handling during shedding cycles and within 48 hours after feeding

🏥 HEALTH CONCERNS & VETERINARY CARE

- Initial wellness exam after purchase — establish a baseline before problems arise
- Annual checkups to track weight, condition, and overall health
- Prompt veterinary attention for any of the signs listed below — do not wait to see if things improve on their own

Contact us if you notice refusal to eat for more than 3–4 weeks, wheezing or open-mouth breathing, nasal discharge, lethargy, bloating, sudden weight loss, retained shed, or stuck eye caps. California kingsnakes are hardy animals — when something is visibly wrong, it warrants prompt attention.

Questions? We've heard weirder ones. Call us.

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