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Kingsnake and Milksnake Care

General Information

Kingsnakes and milksnakes belong to the family Colubridae, which also consists of over 2,000 snakes around the world. The snakes in this family are distributed throughout the world and are dominant everywhere except Australia. This family is considered to be more highly evolved than Boidae, which contains boas and pythons. They have a very narrow rib cage and elongated organs, leaving little room. For this reason, their left lung has become vestigial, leaving only a fully functional right lung.

Both kingsnakes and milksnakes belong to the genus Lampropeltis. Lampro is derived from the Greek word for "shiny" and peltis is Greek for "shields." This is an accurate description of their smooth, glossy, well-defined scales. Scientific names for Kingsnakes are Lampropeltis getula and milksnakes are Lampropeltis triangulum. Both species are found across the continental United States and northern Mexico. Both are robust constrictors and, kingsnakes especially, are known for their immunity to venomous snakes that inhabit their range. Many kings and milks mimic the colors of venomous coral snakes, but remembering the simple rhyme "red on yellow, kill a fellow" can easily differentiate them. Kingsnakes and milksnakes can be easily kept in captivity, are moderately sized, and are quite docile. They appeal to both beginners and experienced herpetoculturists.

Selection

When selecting a snake, the following is a list of things for which to look:

- Firm rounded body
- No cavity on sides or signs of broken ribs
- Clear eyes
- No secretions or cloudiness other than signs of normal shedding
- No sign of mites (look for "dust" speckled appearance of the snake's body which could be mite feces)
- No gaping of mouth or open mouth breathing
- Shiny skin with no sores or scabs (be sure to check underbelly)
- Clean vent area (cloaca)
- No swelling around vent
- Pink inside mouth (no red spots, yellow cheesy substance or excess mucus)
- Clean healthy looking tongue sheath
- No lumps, bumps, excessively hard or soft areas along surface
- Smooth movements

After you acquire your snake, you should take it to a qualified exotic veterinarian that is familiar with reptile medicine for a health exam. Collect a fecal specimen and take it along to have it checked for parasites. It is also helpful to use white butcher paper as an initial substrate to make it easier to monitor your snake for mites, as well as monitor the quality and quantity of feces produced.

Housing

Kingsnakes and milksnakes should be housed alone due to their cannibalistic nature, except when paired for breeding. The cage or aquarium size is dependent upon the size of the snake; however, keep in mind that since these snakes have only one fully functioning lung, they need an area in which to occasionally stretch out completely. This is very important to their respiratory health.

Use the following enclosure guidelines:

Hatchlings: 10 gallon enclosure

Medium-sized adults: 20 gallon enclosure

Larger and longer snakes: 60 gallon enclosure

The top should be secure, since these snakes are escape artists and can squeeze through impossibly tight places. Although they are considered terrestrial, you may want to provide some vertical climbing spaces and above the floor basking spots. A hide box should be provided since they are very secretive. A water bowl should also be provided that is large enough for total immersion of the snake, and it should be thoroughly cleaned every 3-4 days.

When deciding on a substrate, keep in mind the ease with which it can be cleaned. Astro turf can be used but it is rough and irritating to the skin. Another option is outdoor carpeting, which is somewhat smoother. You should have two pieces cut to the size of your enclosure so while one is being cleaned and disinfected, another will be available. The cage should be kept free of waste and cleaned approximately every two weeks. Substrate that could be accidentally ingested during feeding, stays damp, or is irritating to the snake's skin should not be used.

Temperature should be maintained at 76 to 86 degrees Fahrenheit, with a nighttime drop into the lower 70s. Thermometers should be used at the cool end and the warm end of the tank, with the temperature in the warm end not rising more than 1 or 2 degrees above the upper end of the recommended range. Kingsnakes and milksnakes that live in extreme heat or cold climates alter their daily habits to accommodate those extremes. In captivity, such extremes do not need to be provided unless you are trying to breed your snake.

Heating pads may be placed under one half of the tank but under no circumstances should a heat rock be used as it is. If used, it should be equipped with a thermostat to control the temperature. These rocks heat up to 105 degrees Fahrenheit on the surface and can cause severe burns in reptiles. A non-light heat source such as a ceramic heating element can be supplied above the screen top. These can also be equipped with a thermostat for control. Lighting during the day can be provided using a vita-lite.

Feeding

Kingsnakes and milksnakes are active daytime predators with a high metabolic rate (transit time of ingested is approximately 72 hours). In the wild, they are predators of other snakes, lizards, amphibians, rodents, birds, and rattlesnakes. However, they can do well on a diet of killed mice in captivity. The following is a guide for feeding amounts, but every individual is different and the amount should be based on appetite, growth, and body condition of your snake.

Hatchlings: 1 to 2 day old pinkie mice. Feed 1 to 2 mice every 2 to 7 days depending on desired growth.

Sub-adults: mice as big girth-wise as the widest part of the snake. 1 to 2 mice every 1 to 2 weeks.

Adults: (>3 yrs) adult mice or weaned pink rats.

A good rule of thumb: Snakes over 4 feet long need at least 2 adult mice each week.

Frozen killed mice may be thawed in a plastic bag in warm tap water. If you choose to buy live mice or raise your own, they should be killed and frozen for at least a month. Mice can carry small protozoa on the bottoms of their feet that can infect the snake and cause illness. Another good reason to offer killed prey is that live mice or rats can bite the snake leading to abscessation of the site.